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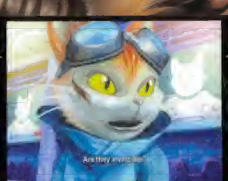

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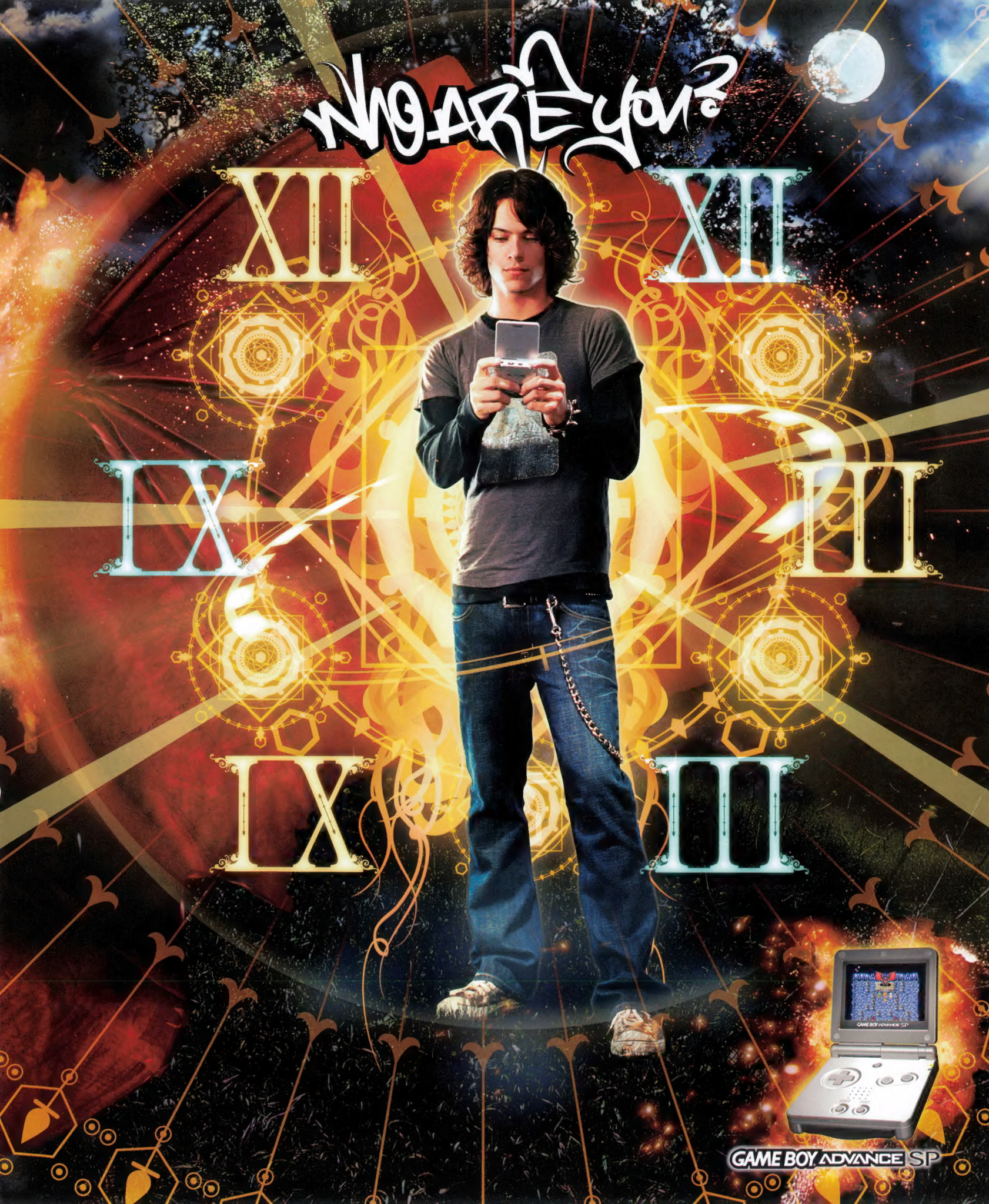
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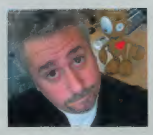

Letter from the Editor

Now it gets interesting...

I was going to write about how difficult it's become to breach the security seals on DVD cases, but then gaming's resident Frankenstein's monster decided to run through the village and scare all of the normal people... I'm referring, of course, to GTA San Andreas, which rolled in just a day and change before we sent our files packin' off to the printer—nowhere near enough time to see it through, but just enough to experience the significance of a game that almost transcends a standard review anyway. When an imperfect game can put up perfect 10s, you know we're not in Kansas anymore. San Andreas evokes emotion, as well it should. With GTA III and GTA Vice City, we could always say "it's just a game," but those rules don't apply to San Andreas.

Walking into a drug dealer's apartment to find one of the hood's muscle-heads emaciated, scrubbing his toilet for crack—hell, I can drive down to Compton and see that today. Should I be laughing while performing a drive-by, or feeling remorse knowing that this happens not too far from where I'm sitting almost every day? Sure, street gangs aren't doing drive-by combos, but they are rolling up on each other and squeezing the trigger on a regular basis, and sadly, just like in San Andreas, innocent bystanders often get caught in the crossfire (so get out of the car and steal their money already). The crux of this is that I'm feeling at all. This game hurts my soul, but I can't stop playing it. With GTAs gone by, I've easily shrugged the satirical violence off as pseudo comical (yeah I'm a goombah, bang you're dead) but with San Andreas, I'm thinking about real life struggles within our inner cities...while having loads of fun living vicariously through it. Powerful stuff from a video game; also exactly what I wanted. This is the official Hollywood and video games merger. I say if you're going to go the realistic route, either go all the way or not at all, and San Andreas goes all the way. It may not be blowing me away as a game, but as an overall "world" experience, there's nothing like it. It's like having *Boys in the Hood* mainlined directly into your brain.

I imagine that at some point the Rockstar brain trust must have asked themselves "Can we do this? Should we do this?" to which the answer was obviously "We have to do this." And who better to finally breach the inner sanctum? It had to be a Rockstar production, because no one does this nearly as well. Strip away all of the trademark Rockstar superfluous regalia (I still say GTA's is the best radio there is, period) and you're left with a succession of mostly menial tasks, but polish it up like you're Quentin Tarantino and you've got a magnum opus. I don't have to remind you how superb the acting and script is. Every role is from the heart. This isn't Hollywood talent phoning in hackneyed performances to appease their agents and stay hip with the kids, this (pardon my French) is some true shit. If SA would have shipped a month ago, I can easily see the question flying to the candidates..."Where do you stand on the social implications of San Andreas?" Now that would have been something.

My biggest fear has always been whether or not the industry would be able to contain a game of this magnitude, and now the test begins. Playing San Andreas will—not might, will—affect the mind of a kid. Remember, they don't beat games, and they skip cinemas. They'll just drive around killing people waiting to hear the F-word again. In the end, I think the true test of how socially significant San Andreas ends up being lies in how it all turns out: Whether it ends up glorifying the real-life tragedy of gang violence or depicting how heartbreaking it really is. Whether the mass appeal of a San Andreas is what's wrong with this country or the fact that we're free to partake in it is what makes it so great remains to be seen. Let's hope it's the latter.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

"...who better to finally breach the inner sanctum? It had to be a Rockstar production..."

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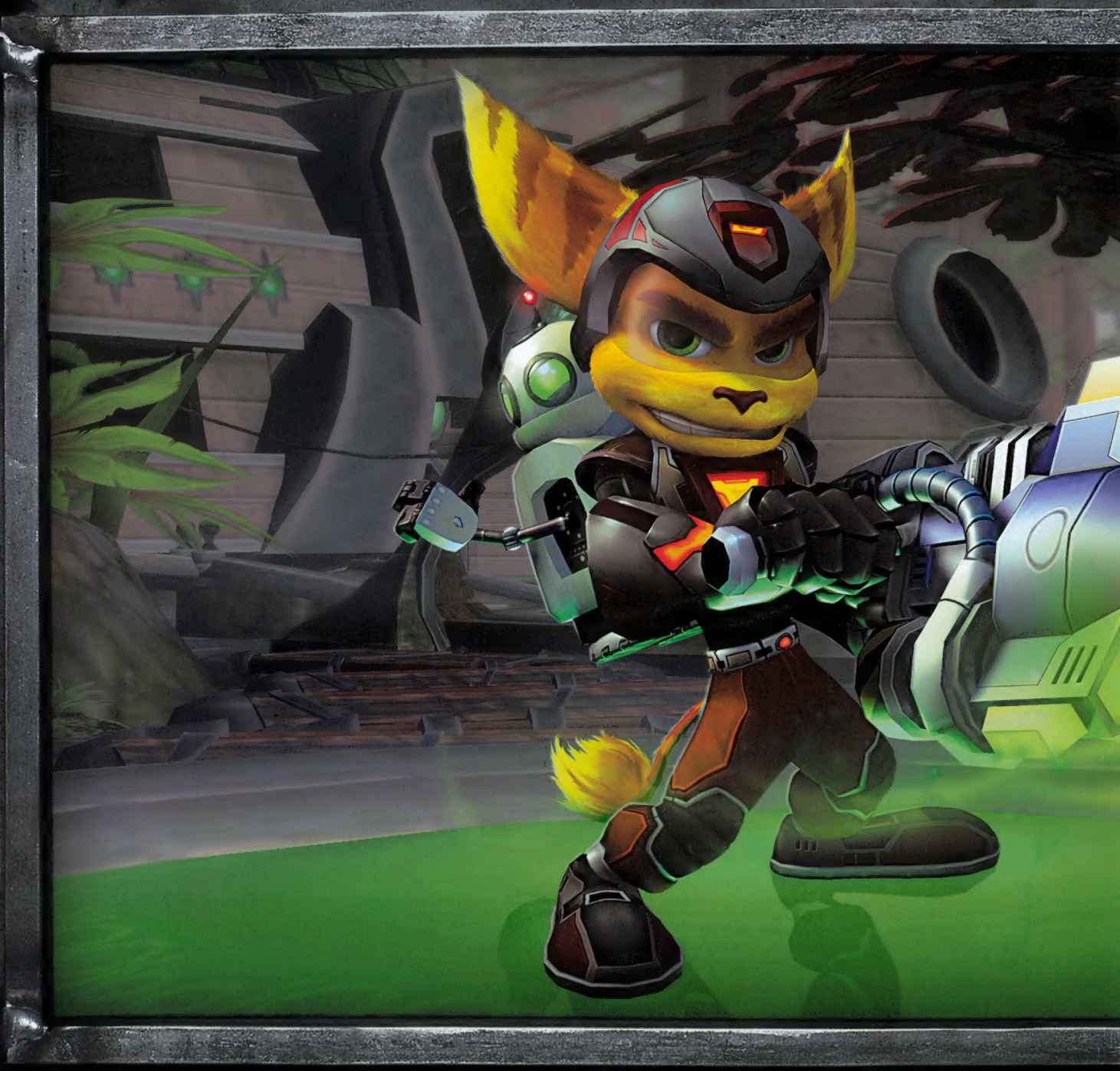

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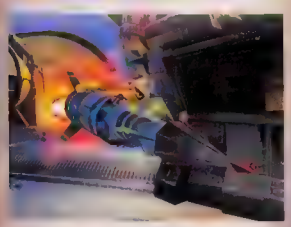

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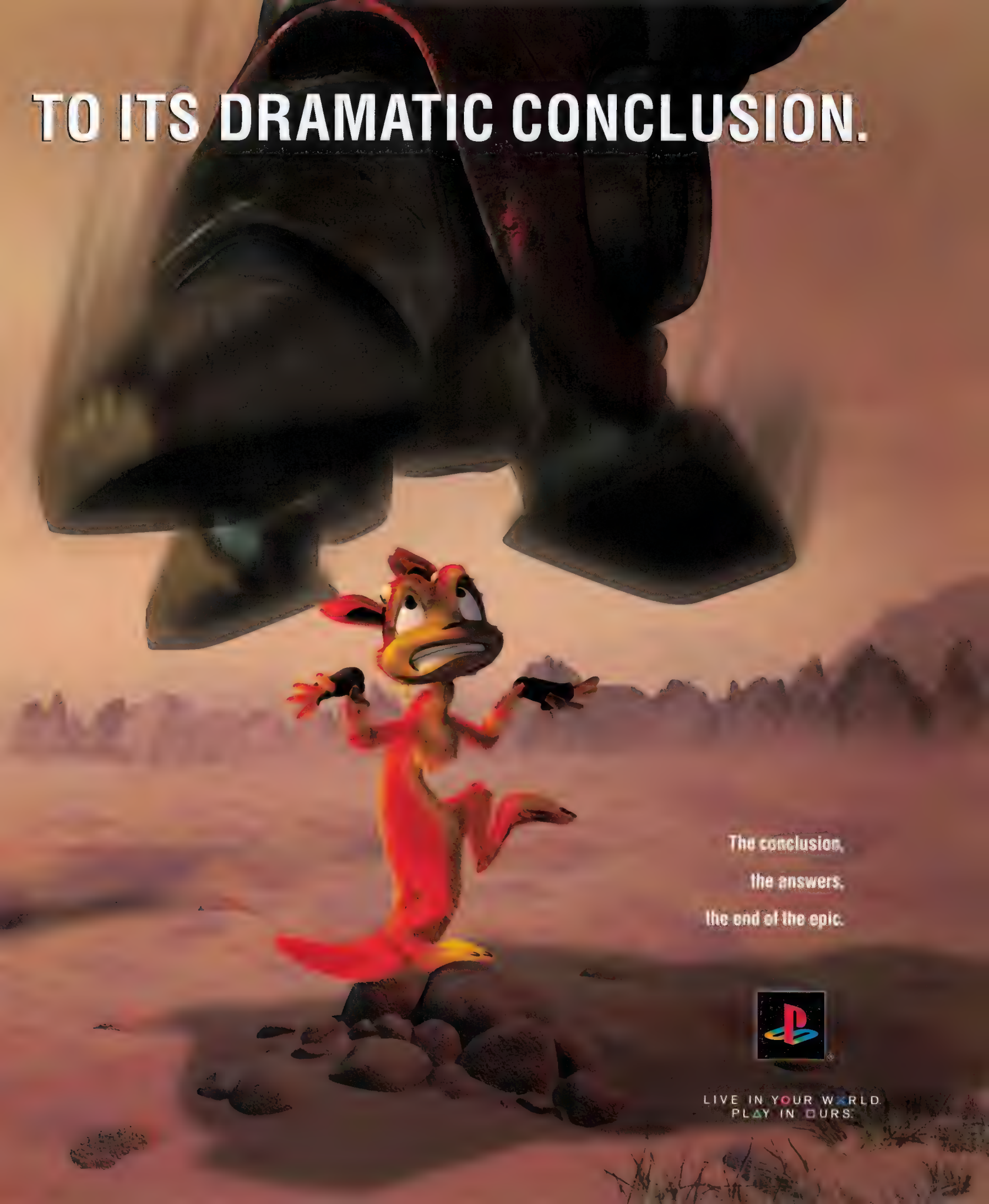
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Play Theory

As Play Magazine remains the single publication still compelling me to read about the gaming world it's also become the source for me to clear my mind regarding that industry. My monthly reading is fueled by an interest in examining a changing media, an evolution from 8-bit games into fully rendered experiences.

Beyond nostalgia for a favorite childhood pastime the gaming world is shaping into ground zero for a cultural revolution, a precise point of intersection between all other art forms, where sound, motion, language and art combine on compact discs. This raises compelling concerns over the direction of the industry as it faces a familiar divide on the issue of content and form, questioning whether ideas form a game, or do games control the ideas. Will fresh narrative force developers into new worlds of creation and play, or will gamers be sieged by formula-spawned repetitive titles?

My bias is that content must often dictate form, that what one is saying influence and determine how it is said, a view that alienates me from the medium as message way of the world at large. But imagine the possibilities of games with fully developed narratives and styles before a formula of play or the engine to spawn it. As opposed to the plot for another first-person shooter, imagine the script determining the style of play, forcing titles devoid of genre, where one really had to "play it" to "know it." Content doesn't need to mean the MGS2 idea of content overload or content for content's sake. It is more a case of "here's what we mean to say, now how do we allow others to experience and interact with this instead of merely witnessing it?" This industry needs to share emphasis with game theory alongside coding, and perhaps then developers would share and discuss the why of their creations as well as the what, with great emphasis on the wh->[Y]. For now it is only a guess as to where the industry goes to, but I suggest that recent titles like Voodoo Vince, Jet Set Radio Future, and even Space Channel 5, stay with us longer not because the game pulled in such characters, but rather that the characters were the game.

Jamie Love

The long and short of it

Ok, now I realize this may sound stupid, but I am of the opinion that games today are just flat out way too long. I want to play many games. All types of games. Contrary to what most developers seem to think, I don't want to play their one single game for the next three months. But also contrary to what they think, I will buy it anyway. How many games over the last few years have a lot of us started to play but then just stopped because the game itself was just not enough fun to warrant spending yet another 30 hours on top of the last to finish it? Is Star Ocean really that much fun to play 60 hours? Was Tales of Symphonia? Even if you force yourself to finish these games, they tend to drag on near the end. When I was growing up my brother and I must have played Streets of Rage 2 from beginning to end 50 times. The game was a couple of hours long. Ditto that for Street Fighter 2 or any other of your old time favorites from the NES, Genesis or SNES etc. But what did these games do different? They were freaking fun from beginning to end! You wanted to go back and play Gunstar Heroes again and again because it was fun. It didn't matter if you stopped halfway through because you could start again and have fun all over again. Can you say the same about some of today's games? Maybe I'm just getting older and my tastes are changing but games like Sudeki and Fable are the perfect length for me. Long enough to enjoy but short enough that I can play the other five games setting in the pile unwrapped. And let me tell you games weren't any cheaper back 15 years ago, Earnest Evans was still $50

> "Contrary to what most developers seem to think, I don't want to play their one single game for the next three months."

just like GTA is today. And when a game is fun and warrants repeated and bordering on unhealthy prolonged play it will naturally happen. How can you resist finding the right gem for your +5 gauntlets? Maybe I'm off base, but I want to play GAMES, not a GAME. Or perhaps there are just too many mediocre games that are way too long....

Brett Hoover

Glut of Smut

Dear Play magazine,
I just finished reading your November 2004 issue, and wanted to write a quick letter to give you hearty "Ditto!" for your response to letters regarding the onslaught of console smut. I post regularly on a friend's video game enthusiast board, and have been quarreling with what is most likely a group of 15-year-old boys, as to why the recent glut of nudity in games is simply not game development at all, but developers' way to make a quick, cheap buck. What can I say to change the opinion of a bunch of guys who titter whenever they see boobs? Am I wasting my time? Your magazine's articles/letters have restored my faith in gamers. I'm not a prude, however I am a gamer (have been since the C64 Zork days) and a female one at that and I'm increasingly disappointed with the choices gamers are given. The Guy Game? I think I lost 40 or so IQ points by just picking up the box! What in the hell kind of Pavlovian conditioning is this?!? Answer a question correctly and you see boobies? Get ready Charles Darwin, I think I smell another branch on the Human Family Tree... Homo Immaturus Gamerus Ignorantassus. Not to mention, pabulum such as this shares shelf space with games by Kojimasan, Miyamotosan, and Suzukisan? Oy Vey what is the world coming to?!? I'm currently playing Fable, Star Ocean III, and am going to pick up Blood Will Tell today. Keep up the good work, love your anime reviews as well.

Sanosuke

Sega Super Star

I can't thank you enough for the truly incredible Sega Genesis anniversary article in your current issue. I've long believed that I was the only one who liked the Genesis, let alone owned one. Even in college I was balked at by my classmates and friends when I revealed that, until the demise of the Saturn, I had always been a devout Segaphile. In my opinion the games that they produced for their systems, despite some lackluster titles, were so much more sincere than anything that Nintendo put on the NES, SNES, or even the N64 (the lone exception there being Goldeneye). Sega's titles always pushed the boundaries of the technology with games such as Space Harrier, Outrun, and Sonic. That's not to say that I didn't enjoy Nintendo's games, but I saw the sheer amount of quality titles that they produced as minimal compared to games like Phantasy Star, EA Sports (on what system did those start?) Games, Sonic, Vectorman, and Bloodlines; not to mention Gunstar Heroes, NiGHTS, etc. The list goes on. It was a bittersweet day for me when Sega announced that they were getting out of the console business and focusing on software. The Saturn, despite its failings, was a vastly underrated machine worthy of the respect that was reserved for Nintendo's overrated N64. Part of me is glad that Sega is doing well in the software industry, despite their lack of quality titles currently. There are few exceptions but I'm anticipating the Sega Ages discs more than many other games. The golden Sega Ages are gone, it's sad but true. With the Ages discs, and the upcoming Matrix Online mmog, I can only hope that they'll find their way back in to the spotlight soon; here's hoping a new system can't be too far away.

J.Nuggs

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Microsoft does a very good thing

Bill Gates rolls out Digital Entertainment Anywhere

Microsoft has a vision—a vision of one integrated, easy-to-use media solution that takes care of all of your TV, music, portable video, photo library and gaming needs. Rolling the entire dog and pony show out recently at The Shrine in LA, the sheer breadth of the project is as you'd expect from the media giant. Dubbed Digital Entertainment Anywhere, DEA is all about choice. The base needs are simple: make sure your next PC is a Windows XP Media Center model, and it becomes a hub/dock for TV viewing and recording, portable music and video players, a photo studio and more. But the trick is that your new PC will beam the lot of it to the Xbox into your living room through the Xbox Media Center Extender, essentially giving you a remote control that frees you from the confines of your PC, allowing you to access and control every facet of home entertainment from your sofa, wire- and PC-free. Supported by over 40 partners, the hardware choices are vast, with a plethora of looks and options available to suit every need and pocketbook.

The consolidation and simplification of in-home multi-media is at hand.

PSP launch details revealed

With a price lower than anyone imagined...

Ever since its astonishingly impressive debut at E3, every gamer has wanted to know two things about Sony's PSP handheld system: when will we really get it, and how much will it cost? Sony has finally answered those questions, at least for Japan, and the answers may surprise a lot of doubters: it's hitting on December 12 (10 days after the Nintendo DS launches) and at a price of 20,790 yen after taxes—about $195, far lower than any estimates had predicted. At such a relatively low price point, Sony doesn't expect to make any profit for a while, but I don't hear gamers complaining. The basic PSP package includes an AC adaptor and a battery pack (which promises four to six hours of gameplay per charge or four to five hours for watching video), and Sony is also offering a PSP Value Pack that adds a 32-Megabyte memory stick, headphones and soft protective case to the deal for a total of 26,040 yen ($245). These accessories will also be sold separately. Twelve titles are expected at launch, and although only Sony's Minna no Golf Portable (Hot Shots Golf) and EA's Need For Speed Underground and Tiger Woods PGA Tour are confirmed as of press time, titles such as Namco's Ridge Racer, Koei's Shin Sangoku Musou (Dynasty Warriors), From's Armored Core: Formula Front, Bandai's Lumines and Capcom's Vampire Chronicle: The Chaos Tower should hit either at launch or shortly after, with a total of 21 games out by year's end. (If you're wondering about Gran Turismo 4, it won't hit until next spring.) Although no announcement has been made about the PSP in North America as of press time (an official statement is likely imminent), a price of $200 seems likely, with the value bundle being offered at $250 if it's released here.

FACE OFF: PSP vs. DS

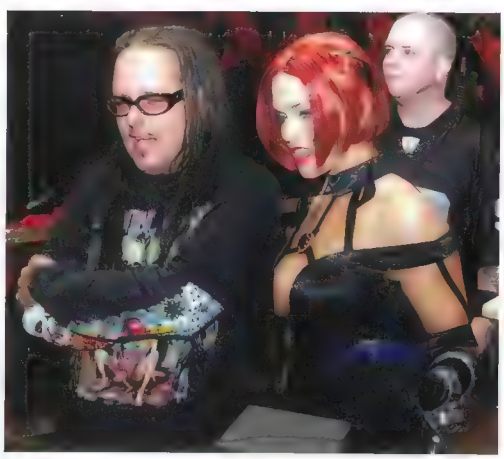
Price (Japan):	20,790 yen	15,000 yen
Screen Resolution:	480 x 272	256 x 192
# of colors:	16.77 million	260,000
# of screens:	1	2
Battery Life:	4-6 hours	6-10 hours

PSP FFVII spin-off announced

At the recent PSP meet, Square Enix recently revealed that yet another Final Fantasy VII spin-off is coming. The title is Dirge Core—Final Fantasy VII, and it's exclusively headed to the PSP in 2005. Although we know that FFVII character Yoshinori Kitase is again handling the character design and Tetsuya Nomura is again handling the character design and scenario, Kitase (the director of Final Fantasy X) is the producer on Dirge. Here's the content to the game have been announced.

BloodRayne comes out to prey

Majesco summons MTV to do the honors



Majesco went for broke rolling out BloodRayne 2, teaming up with MTV for The BloodRayne 2 Halloween Headbangers Ball, co-hosted by Korn lead Jonathan Davis and *Headbangers Ball* host Jamey Jasta, with a live performance by Shadows Fall.

ink

Batman Begins

Media giants converge to deliver the game

Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment, DC Comics and Electronic Arts have announced they've joined forces to bring *Batman Begins* (the new film that explores the origins of the Batman legend and the Dark Knight's emergence as a force for good in Gotham) to multiple videogame platforms in 2005, based on the upcoming film starring Christian Bale, to be released day and date with the film on the PS2, Xbox, PSP, GameCube and Game Boy Advance. The console development honors have gone to Eurocom (who last year did an amazing job on Buffy the Vampire Slayer: Chaos Bleeds) with the handheld duties going to Vicarious Visions, creators of all games portable.

King of Kongs

Visionaries Michel Ancel and Peter Jackson unite...this is gonna be big

Ubisoft and Universal Studios Consumer Products Group have announced that the games based on Universal Pictures' upcoming *King Kong* remake directed by Peter Jackson will be available worldwide on all platforms in conjunction with the December 14, 2005 theatrical release of the movie. Ubisoft's prized Beyond Good & Evil development team, based in Montpellier, France, and award-winning Montreal studio will work closely with Peter Jackson and Wingnut Films to produce a game that will reflect the visual interpretation, character dynamics and dramatic narrative of Jackson's epic film. "I'm really enjoying the collaboration with these artists, and all the creative possibilities we're discovering," said Peter Jackson. "By working closely with the development team, Ubisoft is enabling me to help shape the kind of gaming experience that I will be proud to associate with this new version of *King Kong*, a story that began my life-long love of film." Indeed, he could not be in better hands.

Brilliant minds: Michel Ancel and Peter Jackson (back & center) combine forces

Larry gets thrown on the barbie

While VU Games' Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude didn't receive the highest score in Play's history, we certainly feel that if you want to engage in Larry's sexcapades, you should be able to. The Australians don't feel the same way. Following a trend that also affected Grand Theft Auto III and Manhunt, the latest Larry adventure was denied a rating by Australia's Office of Film and Literature Classification, banning the game for sale in the country. The adult content in Leisure Suit Larry is definitely more explicit than any console game before it, but there's certainly no harm in selling it to players of appropriate age—whether you play it or not should be up to consumers, not the government. The ironic part is that incidents like this will probably only raise demand for the product.

WWE lays the legal smack down on THQ

The world of professional wrestling may be preplanned, but one thing THQ never expected is that it would be sued by the WWE, which THQ holds an exclusive license to as far as video games are concerned in a joint venture with toy manufacturer Jakks Pacific. According to the WWE's 73-page legal document, the company alleges that top-ranking officers of Jakks may have bribed WWE's then-licensing agent Stanley Shenker in 1998 in order to secure the game license (which had been previously been held by Acclaim) and expand their toy license agreement. Even though THQ's name appears prominently in the allegations, company personnel have not actually been named in any wrongdoing, and as of press time, the company has not been served legal papers. In fact, at THQ's recent fiscal Q2 2005 financial report, everything appeared to be business as usual, and WWE WrestleMania XXI for Xbox is still on track for a March release. A DS WWE game is even rumored to be in the works. Unless things change dramatically, it doesn't look like THQ is in much danger of losing the WWE license, a deal that lasts until 2009.

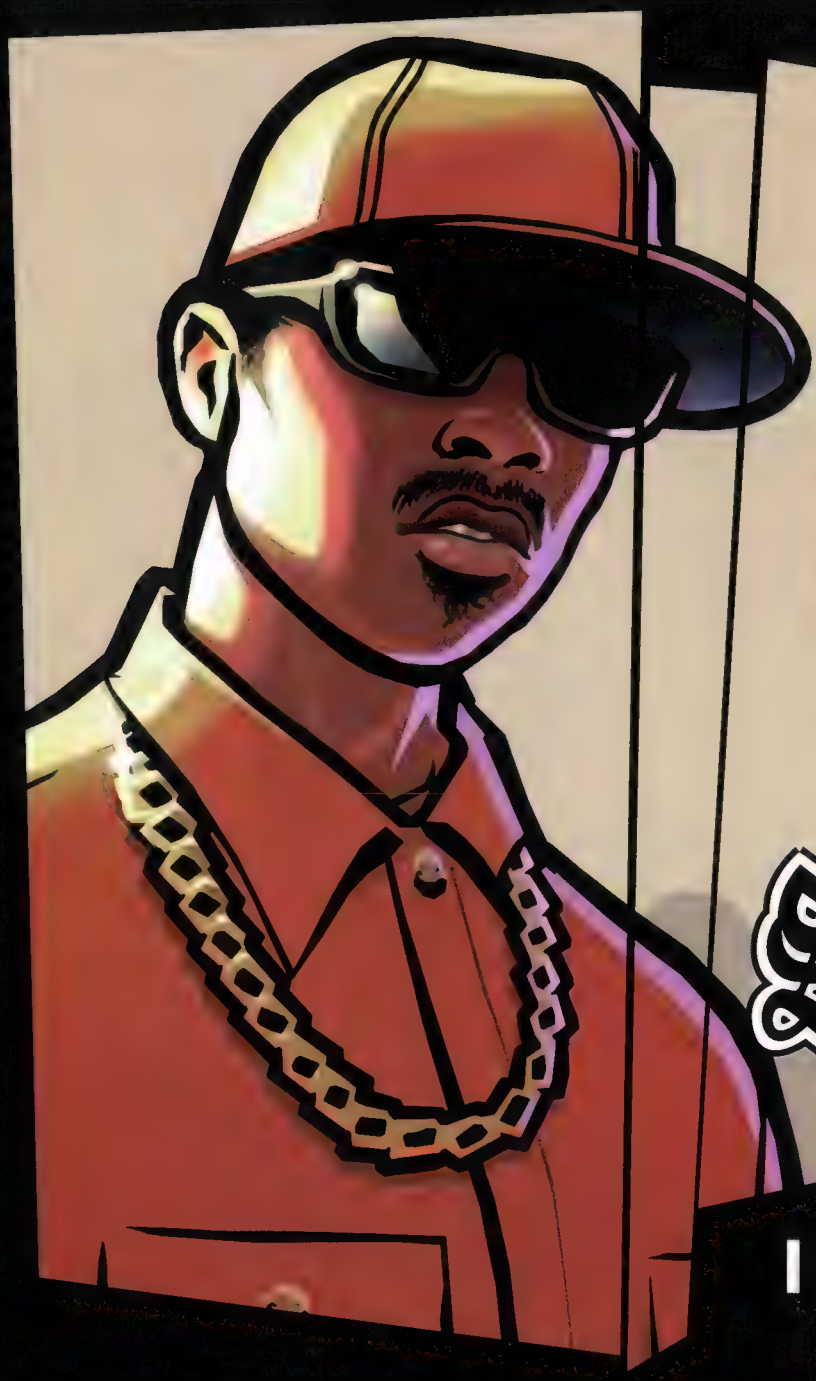
Acclaim's Juiced drives again

While we still await the fate of Acclaim's most excellent twitch-action festival known as The Red Star, another of the bankrupt company's properties has been bought up. THQ has acquired the publishing rights to Juiced, a street-racing sim that was set to be published for PlayStation 2, Xbox and PC earlier this year before Acclaim's financial woes halted publication. THQ's bid snatched the game out of the hands of Take Two, which had previously been negotiating with Acclaim for the game's rights, and Electronic Arts, whose bid for the game came too late. No release date has been given for Juiced, but THQ appears to be taking its time and ironing out any issues in the game before it sees publication. Now if only publishers would start fighting over The Red Star...

Midway makes an Inevitable purchase

Last issue we reported that Midway was working to start up a new game studio in Austin, Texas. Well, it turns out that the Chicago-based publisher decided not to create a new studio so much as it decided to just buy one whole. The developer in question is Inevitable Entertainment, the studio currently working on Midway's first-person shooter Area 51 (on Xbox and PS2) and also known for its work on VU Games' The Hobbit and Tribes: Aerial Assault. "In acquiring Inevitable Entertainment, we have added an extremely creative development group to our product development organization and furthered our ability to deliver high-quality, compelling content," noted Midway president and chief executive officer David F. Zucker in a press statement. "Our increased internal product development capabilities offer an important balance and blend with our external development partners, and enable us to continue to publish critically and commercially successful software for current and future systems." With the acquisition, Inevitable Entertainment's name has been changed to Midway Studios Austin.

ROCKSTAR GAMES
PRESENTS



grand theft auto
San Andreas™

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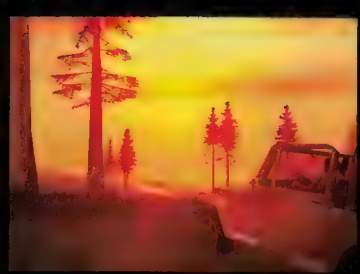

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MATURE 17+
M
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Strong Language
Strong Sexual Content
Use of Drugs

INTERSCOPE RECORDS

PlayStation.2

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Virgin helps...

Hero
DVD

King Arthur (Director's Cut)
DVD

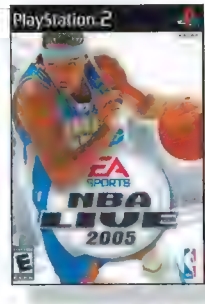
Princess Diaries 2
DVD

Atari Anthology!
PS2
GAME

Dragon Ball Z Budokai 3
PS2
GAME

Donkey Kong Country 2
GBA
GAME

Metroid Prime
NGC
GAME



NBA Live 2005
PS2, Xbox, NGC
GAME

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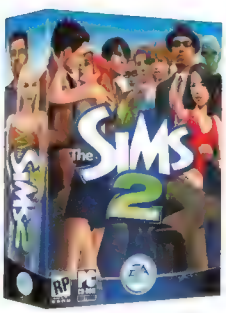
Tony Hawk's Underground 2
Xbox, PS2, NGC
GAME

Star Wars Battlefront
PS2
GAME

Grand Theft Auto San Andreas
PS2
GAME

Gran Turismo® 4 The Real Driving Simulator
PS2
GAME

Roller Coaster Tycoon 3
PC
GAME



The Sims 2
PC
GAME

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005
PS2, Xbox, NGC
GAME

ESPN NBA 2K5
PS2, Xbox
GAME

Fable
Xbox
GAME

Killzone
PS2
GAME

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas** rockstar / ps2
02	**Halo 2** microsoft game studios / xb
03	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** konami / ps2
04	**Half-Life 2** vu games / pc
05	**Metroid Prime 2 Echoes** nintendo / gc
06	**Need For Speed Underground 2** ea / ps2, xb, gc
07	**GoldenEye: Rogue Agent** ea / ps2, xb, gc
08	**Call of Duty: Finest Hour** activision / ps2, xb, gc
09	**The Incredibles** thq / ps2, xb, gc
10	**NBA Live 2005** ea / ps2, xb, gc

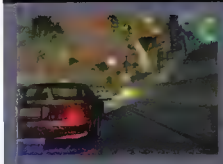
NPD/TRSTS Top Ten Sept Game Sales

01	**Pokémon Firered** nintendo / gba
02	**Fable** microsoft game studios / xb
03	**Pokémon Leafgreen** nintendo / gba
04	**Madden NFL 2005** ea / ps2
05	**Star Wars: Battlefront** lucasarts / xb
06	**Star Wars: Battlefront** lucasarts / ps2
07	**Star Ocean: Till the End of Time** square enix / ps2
08	**NBA Live 2005** ea / ps2
09	**ESPN NFL 2K5** sega/global star / ps2
10	**Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005** ea / ps2

Your Megastore Beckons!

GTA: San Andreas
rockstar / ps2

Already the highest-ranking PS2 game of all time, Rockstar, to say the least, has done it again.



Need For Speed Underground 2
ea / ps2, xb, gc

Partake in the massive universe of Underground 2—EA's most in-depth racer to date.

Halo 2
microsoft / xb

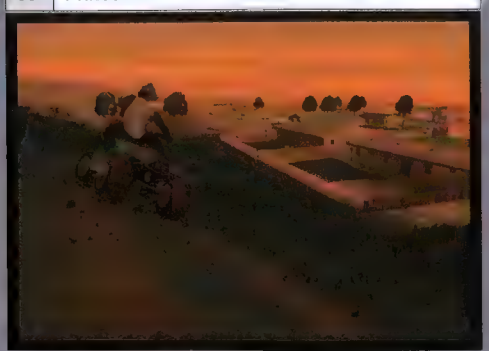
Here it is, three years in the making, and yes—it is the pinnacle of first-person shooters on console.

Staff and reader selections

vote for your most wanted games! database@playmagazine.com

Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	**Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas** rockstar / ps2
02	**Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal** sony / ps2
03	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** konami / ps2
04	**Gran Turismo 4** sony / ps2
05	**Prince of Persia: Warrior Within** ubisoft / xb



Dave Halverson editor-in-chief

01	**Jak 3** sony / ps2
02	**Tork** ubisoft / xb
03	**Viewtiful Joe 2** capcom / gc
04	**Fable** microsoft game studios / xb
05	**Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas** rockstar / ps2

Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	**Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal** sony / ps2
02	**Halo 2** microsoft game studios / xb
03	**Prince of Persia: Warrior Within** ubisoft / ps2
04	**Fable** microsoft game studios / xb
05	**GoldenEye: Rogue Agent** ea / ps2

Chris Hoffman some editor

01	**Capcom Fighting Evolution** capcom / ps2
02	**Metal Gear Solid 3: Snake Eater** konami / ps2
03	**WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw** thq / ps2
04	**Paper Mario: Thousand-Year Door** nintendo / gc
05	**Fable** microsoft game studios / xb

Michael Hobbs art director

01	**Ace Combat 5: The Unsung War** namco / ps2
02	**Paper Mario: Thousand-Year Door** nintendo / gc
03	**Katamari Damacy** namco / ps2
04	**Zelda II: The Adventure of Link** nintendo / gba
05	**FFXI Online: Chains of Promathia** square enix / pc

Nelson Lui associate art director

01	**Dead or Alive Ultimate** tecmo / xb
02	**Half-Life 2** vu games / pc
03	**Halo 2** microsoft game studios / xb
04	**WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw** thq / ps2
05	**Call of Duty: Finest Hour** activision / ps2

JADE EMPIRE
play games

Jade Empire

The makers of Knights of the Old Republic take their mastery of the story-driven RPG to mythical China

If you spotted a man drowning in the river, would you save him? You respond to his cries for help, recognizing his face. He's known to be a murderer. Is his life worth saving now? If you walk away, perhaps it's you who is now a killer. If you walk away, maybe that choice will eventually keep a murderer from killing again. Or maybe you decide to reach out, and this man makes peace with his world, raises a family, creates new life.

When you live in the Jade Empire, you live a life of real decisions. It's one thing to play a game that actually presents you with such compelling scenarios. It's another when your choice begins to define you, affect the community around you, impact your journey down the road.

Consider another scenario. "There is this place overrun by pirates, and they're running a slave ring," explains Jim Bishop, producer on Jade Empire. "You have the chance to free the young woman they've captured—but you can also twist her. You can say, 'Here's a knife, go kill your slaver,' which turns her maybe more evil."

Throughout the game you will amass followers, who may begin quite pure of spirit, yet can quickly be turned to the dark side with a little devilish prodding. And as in everyday life, there are peers who are really quite depraved on first meeting. If it's your plot, they can be nudged to do good works.

"Your followers actually respond to your actions far more than in Knights of the Old Republic," explains lead designer Kevin Martens. "The natural extension of that is fewer black and white choices and more moral issues that reflect what you have to deal with in real life. To make the choice meaningful so that the decision you have to make is more difficult and by extension more compelling."

Of the many layers surrounding Jade Empire, what BioWare is attempting to do with character and story is perhaps most intriguing. This isn't a story in the traditional sense of providing a rigid string of canned dialogue that winds up to a singular conclusion. There's always more than one way to tackle a quest, and the consequences will be far-reaching. "There's a scene where you go into a bar; you're looking for a particular person, an information giver, who knows something about Master Li's past, your martial arts master," explains Bishop. "She gets accosted by some drunks before you can confront her. They're stranded in the town of Thien's Landing, because of this other problem you're trying to solve. There's all these sailors who can't sail, the dam's closed, so they're stuck in town, drinking. So she gets attacked, you beat these guys up, and it comes down to deciding whether to save the town or doom it forever, and make a bunch of money off the wine merchants, who want to keep the sailors in town indefinitely."

"So maybe it's better for you as a character, to get a lot more money and experience by doing what the bad guys want," Martens points out. "That's the temptation. Whereas if you do the good thing, it's harder. The more austere road,

you're gonna get less money, people will be grateful, but that doesn't necessarily mean you'll become more powerful."

Carefully weighed decisions lead to points earned for either the good or evil side of your growth, which inevitably alerts the world's inhabitants to your evolving reputation. Certain people may not speak to you when you are in need of invaluable information. You may not gain access to an area because of your choices. Some teachers won't help you learn important skills; others may accept you for exactly the same reasons you were shunned by another. "Of course, your appearance changes with your choices too, although we've got some surprises in store for that," explains Bishop. "One thing, if you start to become evil, your shadow changes. It goes from a basic blurry shadow to a more twisted thing that's actually plotting things and writhing around while you are moving. And for good, we brighten up the rim lighting."

It may be a bold statement to compare your game to what was one of the best-written and most dynamically complex stories in a game, Knights of the Old Republic, but BioWare's allowed to get a little cocky since they're the ones who crafted it. If you've played that phenomenally acclaimed RPG, you already have an idea of how BioWare is approaching Jade Empire. "This is an action-RPG, but it's really…this is an RPG. We haven't forgotten our roots," Bishop points out. "We have a system like KOTOR, where you can attract up to 12 guys to your side. There's advancements so you can actually level up your styles. You've got a dragon amulet that acts as a deep inventory. You've got maps and a journal system, the whole nine. It's very familiar as an RPG. You've even got the good and evil meter to keep track of. There's always these debates about what makes an RPG. For us, it's all about a game that immerses you in a character and immerses you in a story. That's it; that's all it is."

This vast journey unfolds somewhere between heaven and earth. It is called the Jade Empire, a hypnotically imagined place inspired by mythical China. "You start out as a young martial arts master," begins Bishop. "You just graduated from this highly regarded school. The problem in the world is that ghosts and the undead are coming back more and more often. Throughout the mythology of the world, there's always been a theme where ghosts would occasionally come and solve the problems they had in life, then they'd fade away to be reincarnated. Here, ghosts are not going away, and people are becoming more and more afraid to travel between towns. This problem keeps growing. So you set out on your quest to try and find out why this is happening, and you have a very personal reason for doing this, more than just for the good of the world."

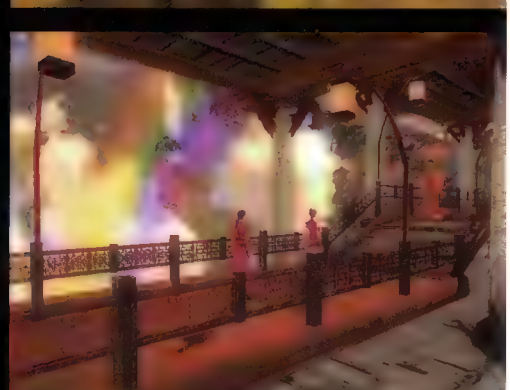
The you in the story is one of six visually distinct characters, grounded in the fantastical, each employing some competing form of martial arts and metaphysical discipline. "The characters are archetypes. Tiger Shen is your large fighter. Furious Ming is your fast, quick guy. Scholar Ling is the magician female," explains Martens. "What we want you to do is take these characters and make them your own. Pretty much immediately, you are presented with role-playing choices and how you make those choices is who your character is and how they react to you. We didn't want to nail you down; it's not a class-based game. You're not forced to play your characters a certain way. For example, I can take Wu the Lotus Blossom, and I can have her set entirely with magic styles. Or I can switch to transformation styles, or I can go to all martial styles."

While your presence in the Jade Empire may be visually defined by your specific choice of journeyer, the way you command your growing powers is basically the same across the board. There's a simple, tactical matrix that stays true for all the styles in combat, which, in an uncharacteristic turn for BioWare, is real-time, where customization yet again is the idea—go for a lock-on, fight in free-form, or pause to switch styles and assess the battleground. "For combat, do we want to go sort of the Soul Calibur route, where it's all based on button presses and combos? We just didn't want it to come down to, Ok, hit A, A, B, B, X, half circle, the Street Fighter-type stuff," recalls Bishop. "So what we went for instead was making these little tactical slices that are styles. Looking at the martial style, you've got punches, kicks, a slam move and a clear. This suite of moves is all accessible with a single button press, except for the slam, which is a combination. A block dominates a basic attack. A slam dominates a block, and basic attack dominates a slam. So once you've got that down, you can use any style in the game."

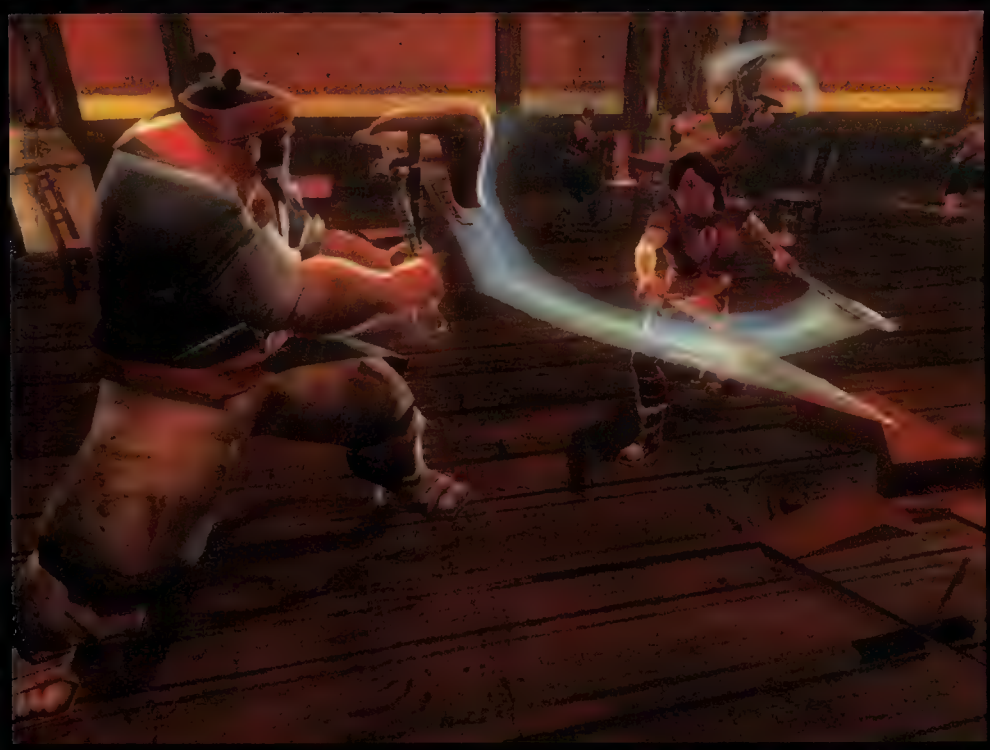
"When you live in the Jade Empire, you live a life of real decisions."

In Taoism, our existence is broken down into the mind—not the brain, but the intellect and awareness; body—the tangible, physical being; and spirit—the connection with the flow of energy of the world. Working in harmony yet existing as very distinct entities, these three concepts form the foundation to your warrior's primary abilities, which then interconnect with secondary functions of focus, health, and chi. Focus essentially suspends the flow of time, allowing you to slow your enemy. Health is what you'd expect, represented with hit points. Chi is the spirit energy and basically charges your store of abilities, imbuing your character with added strength, magic, summon attacks and even transformation—the ability to assume form of several of the creatures that roam the land. Throw all this into the mix of three general, very customizable styles of weapons, magic and martial arts, and you've got the core of the combat system.

Whether you're busting out a giant club or axe or laying the smack down with a flurry of acrobatic punches and kicks, the moves are entirely motion-captured—a first for BioWare. "We brought in martial artists from mainland China in some cases." Bishop points out. "We have styles like Monkey and Drunken Master. It was difficult sometimes to find people to do that at the master level, but we found them. We have a lot of traditional Yang style, we have fighting styles inspired by…



BioWare's latest engine at play: cinematic gameplay born anew.



Superb model integrity supported by fluid animation and brilliant character design bring the action to vivid life.

well, certainly by Tai Chi, but also by stuff like styles based around the eight trigrams of the Yi Chang, where for the practitioner, everything is circular; you walk around in these circles. Not all the styles are just Bruce Lee-style punching. There are these very Yin, internal styles. Some of them are quite soft, are about slowing people down, or controlling their minds, slowing down the environment. They're very magical in that way."

Character stats are definitely being focused on to build the immersion. So much of what we do in life throughout our personal growth comes down to exhaustive nuance. In a way, stats are more than just tradition—it really makes sense to show your virtual persona grow and advance in delineated, analytical terms. In a sense, you're applying psychological growth through numbers. "It is very much like [KOTOR], and even Baldur's Gate—it's a hardcore role-playing game," explains Bishop. "The combat, like any good role-playing game, has a lot of stats. If you want to see them, there's a lot of information; you can really tweak your character. There's so many different choices you can make to level up. Fewer stats than KOTOR, but the choices you make are just as varied."

And, of course, here you're providing an entirely different type of imbuement. "Character advancement, for the most part, when you advance your character, you get ability point scores. You can spend those to raise your primary abilities: your body, mind, spirit," begins Bishop. "Those, in turn, affect your secondary abilities. You also get style points, and every style has a certain number of things you can advance on and you can level up. So if you're using Dire Flame, a magic style, you could improve the way it uses chi. So you could make it use less chi every time you do an attack. Or you can add an attack, like the fire dragon I was summoning in. That's a specific attack that I had to level up to get. You also got damage per attack. Effects like immolate get added as you level up. Every style has number of these things you can advance, and you can really customize your style to a certain degree. If you're using Paralyzing Palm, what effect do you want that end effect to be? By the time you're done with the game, your styles may look very, very different from mine."

That's a very important note on BioWare's intentions: your journey is truly your own. BioWare prides themselves on pushing the boundaries of what a game world should encompass and are very adamant about allowing you to live in the Jade Empire according to your own very personalized, reactionary rules. "If you're not that interested in the stat thing so much, there's kind of an auto level-up feature," Bishop points out. "If you're more interested in getting into the story, or more into getting through the action, that system is a little more advanced than we've had in the past as well. It'll level you up a little more intelligently."

As I watched Bishop zip through the areas—one style you can center on is Focus Run, which helps appease the impatient traveler—I was struck by just how gorgeous the game is. All the little details, the pastoral beauty, the brilliant lighting, the pervasive animations. "We try to add movement to everything. We just added a lot of little touches," says Bishop. "That's one of the things when we were done with Knights, we said, 'It would be great if it would be more motion and light.' The light on the character that responds to your direction, certainly the cloth blowing around, the ability to have danglies and stuff."

In what will obviously be a huge land to uncover, the spread of variety is impressive. And the inspiration behind its structure is fascinating. "In the Pirate's Lair, you are trying to uncover information about airships," explains Bishop. "This area is set up like… I don't know if you're familiar with the art of scholar stones. They're basically just beautiful ornamental stones that used to be coveted by scholars; you'd actually place them on your desk. This area is actually set up as one huge scholar stone with all these holes running through it. Here you discover that the pirates are in league with the Lotus Assassins."

"We've got everything from wind-swept cliffs overlooking deep valleys to the Imperial City—which is enormous, this huge feat of engineering—from floating palaces to massive tomb complexes to mountaintops. Lots of different settings, lots of different scenes. You'll never quite know where you're going to go next."

One of the more impressive areas is a haunted forest, where you've set out to investigate. "Our art director has been living and breathing Chinese paintings for a long time," Bishop comments. "Use a palette and textures and vistas that are inspired by Chinese ink paintings. These are all similar to sixth-century scrolls."

Everything is inspired by an extensive source of classic literature, movies and art, from *Hero* to "Outlaws of the Marsh" to "Journey to the West." And while out of respect to the importance of the material, nothing in the world is pulled directly, yet the absorption of the spiritual elegance and beauty of Chinese mythology obviously filled BioWare's imaginations to overflow on their unusually blank canvas. Plus, there really wasn't that much to go off in terms of things like creatures. "In some of these books, they talk of these horse-headed demons and beings with ox heads, and literally, there's a picture of a guy with an ox head," laughs Bishop. "We let our artists go crazy."

The Jade Empire is filled with much exotic life, carefully detailed and painstakingly animated: this is a new engine, and you'll be treated to an array of touches far more sophisticated than KOTOR. That the inhabitants come alive with a multidimensional personality is what will finally resonate. "Wait till you see these characters," enthuses Bishop. "They're really intriguing. There's a nice balance of comedy; there are some of these characters that have a lot of pathos…a lot of tragedy. There's love interest; we have a romance going on. There are really so many engaging

characters, both followers and enemies. Some of the best enemies we have done: Grand Inquisitor Gao and some of the Lotus Assassins are really quite dark."

The one enemy I see getting worked is the toad demon, a disgusting creature that slams you with its big belly and lashes with its tongue. The enemies look menacing, but they don't sit back and let you button mash. "Enemies are worthy fighters as well. They will exploit that matrix I was telling you about," Bishop points out. "Smarter bosses especially, smarter enemies, they know the full range of your moves. If they see you blocking, they'll use a slam. If they see you slamming, they'll use basic attacks to interrupt you. This isn't an easy game, but I don't want the hardness to be people hammering on the buttons. I want people thinking and figuring things out. You've got a boss, for instance, who's immune to most styles, until you can use one of your chi draining styles, and then he doesn't have any protection. Then you can go for his weak spots."

Outside of the mature themes, you're definitely sending your foes, both human and monster, to a bloody death. "Yeah, the combat in the game is cool martial arts action. Very stylized, so there is more realistic-looking violence, but it still has this edge of mysticism to it," begins Martens. "But we strive not to put violence in there for the sake of violence. It's not just in there because it's cool to make something explode. And because it's realistic within a stylish setting, we strive to show the repercussions of your actions. When you do something violent, which is a lot in the game, how does that affect the world you're in? How do you react to that? How does the average guy in the street, what does he think when he sees someone dead? He's not callus, he's struck by it. From the human side of what you're doing, [it] makes the game more immersive; it makes you think a little more. Rather than just, 'Dude, I totally got that fatality.'"

"Outside of the mature themes, you're definitely sending your foes, both human and monster, to a bloody death."

In a world as developed as Jade Empire, saying that you solve puzzles might be a bit of a misnomer. You won't be flipping a switch to open an arbitrary door you came across on the other side of the hill, and you won't be having to find scratch paper with pass codes. "A new thing for us is the ability to modify walk-mesh—which sounds pretty dry—but what it actually means is we can do stuff like set up areas as elevators or drive things around. You can knock down a wall and go through it; you can knock down all the support struts, something falls down and it's now a walkable area. These types of environmental puzzles are really new for a BioWare game. It's always been more 'static door, get through the door some way.' Now it's much more 'how do I get to the next level, how do I get up to the third level, the fourth level?'"

Also new to BioWare is the privilege of creating a world and its boundaries completely from scratch. Just look at what's being released this year to see how rare this is becoming. Sound tough? "It's been an absolutely different experience," begins an emphatic Bishop. "We've had the good luck of working on some highly developed properties, some of the best properties around. With D&D and the Forgotten Realms world and with *Star Wars*, you've got these very long histories, and a ton of source material. Any question you might have, you can literally just look it up, ask any rabid fan. Forgotten Realms—you can literally find out what they serve for food in a particular tavern. Seriously, you can look up, it's one piece of silver for this type of ale. And you've got a rule-set in both those pieces. In Jade, it was entirely different. We started with world design documents, and with a design doc, a technical doc and an art bible. There was stuff that we hadn't done before. Things like literally, what do people wear, what do people eat, where do fighting styles fit into all this. What is the concept of good and evil here? What do good and evil mean in mythical China? Who are the bad guys, and why are they bad? What's the cosmology, what happens to you when you die? Who are the deities? What is the shape of the world, what else is on the world?"

"We've got a token European in this game, a guy who washed up on the shores, Sir Roderick, who's essentially a composite of European, or medieval stereotypes. We had to establish there was, in fact, this place where the Europeans lived way across the sea. And that's just world design stuff. And then when you get into mechanics, you're like, 'What are the importability scores? What can characters do in this environment? What's the most powerful that a character can become? What does the level progression look like? What's a skill?' Really to a level of degree we've never even had to attempt before."

That level of commitment may have almost killed a few BioWare employees, but in death there is the life of the Jade Empire—perhaps an important defining moment for modern game design. **Brady Fiechter**

System: Xbox
Developer: BioWare
Publisher: Microsoft
Available: March

Interview

Dr. Ray Muzyka and Dr. Greg Zeschuk, joint CEOs, BioWare Corp, and co-executive producers, Jade Empire

play: You guys were contemplating doing a game surrounding kung fu pretty much since you started the company, right?
Dr. Ray Muzyka: Yeah, close to a decade actually.
Dr. Greg Zeschuk: It was actually kind of our second game idea, after we had done Baldur's Gate.
Muzyka: We were talking about it well before Baldur's Gate even came out.
Zeschuk: Oh, for sure, yeah.
Muzyka: But we wanted to wait till we were ready as a company to do it, we had the right experience and had worked on some past successes. People here have been very passionate about the idea as well. The team has made it their own. It's become a much different idea than what we originally had in mind. But the core is the same. You get to become a martial arts master.

It's a pretty big deal, especially nowadays, to be diving into an original idea.
Zeschuk: I would say we kind of built BioWare and directed it to the point that we could do this. It's a big task to undertake.

You guys make some highly regarded, very distinct games. What defines a BioWare game?
Muzyka: There's a core of some things, and there's the things we add on to that core. A BioWare game is typically a strong story. The ability to role-play, to make choices for good or evil. To really feel like you're part of a living world. Being able to explore a world and help it develop. Seeing it develop as you roam, just seeing this epic place you're a part of. Another one is character progression. Your main character—you want someone you can identify with, you think is special and progresses and you help develop. Probably the last one is character interaction, a really immersive character system. Like where you're talking to NPCs and virtual actors. Characters with VO and lip-syncing and motion capture and AI. And on top of that, we combine that with different styles of gameplay. Jade Empire is an action-RPG, so we're merging those core areas of an RPG—story, exploration and character progression and interaction—with an action system. A really dynamic, active, real-time combat system where you get to become a martial arts master. We're always trying to advance the art of the story in our games.
Zeschuk: I think maybe some of the points you might see in a game like MDK, which is a little out of the role-playing space, is the subtle stuff. Obviously the humor is there. A lot of our games are quite serious in their presentation; we try to make sure there's humor and entertainment. We really focus on the characters, because it's the characters that really make a game interesting, what drives you to finish it. Some games set out to make the experience tough. MDK2 was a challenging game, but at the end of the line, you wanted to make sure it was worth it. There's a big payoff for pursuing it.

You guys are obsessive about story.
Muzyka: We have really great writers here, and it's like you say, they're learning each time. We have really low turnover. Our turnover is like three percent annualized over 10 years. The same people who worked on Baldur's Gate, Neverwinter Nights, Knights of the Old Republic, are working on Dragon Age, Jade Empire, future titles. And the people are really self-critical. They look at a game like Knights of the Old Republic, the team always talks about what they can do better the next time around. We're never satisfied. What we did in our past stories is never good enough. It has to be better the next time around. Certainly there are things we can learn from and improve on every time.
Zeschuk: I think one of the big things that's exciting is the way the stories are being crafted. They're really getting that nonlinearity to them. Jade's a great example. We're in the middle of play testing, and if you go into detail, you can actually… I was talking to Jim [Bishop, producer] about this one area, and he asked, "How did you do it?" And we had all these different ways of discovering things. I'm actually discovering if you pursue certain things in the game, more stuff is going to be revealed. If you do this, then something specific may come out of the backstory, or you can just completely forget about that. It's very similar to something we experienced when we were finishing Knights of the Old Republic where the water cooler talk became really interesting. "I did this and this and saw that." "What? I did this and this and saw this."
Muzyka: To us, that's signs of a good storyline when you hear people talking about [how] they experienced the same situation in different ways and it meant something different to them. Or maybe they bypassed something that wasn't that interesting to them, but they got really deep into something else.
Zeschuk: Your individual story is really different from someone else's depending on those choices. Just the simple choices. The solution choices for various, important quests are really big. There are huge differences from the outcome. So if you chose this, the outcome is totally different. That's really neat, because by the end of the game, I've experienced not only something totally different that's great for replay, but I feel it's really personalized. That's a great feeling.

How do you learn from the unexpected?
Muzyka: There's been conscious attempts to improve upon or change the things we didn't expect from Knights of the Old Republic. In a way, it's kind of emergent story-play design. You never know how the player will experience it. We have the same thing going on in the combat system in Jade. The way the styles interact is somewhat emergent. You can take one style and combine it with another. Sometimes there's an intentional relationship between the styles, and sometimes it's more spontaneous. Maybe an example would be if you poison an enemy, and you go into a really defensive style, and you kind of watch them wither and die. That was never even planned for. There's dozens of ways and combinations to approach a battle. And if you do one subquest first, you might get a different result in another subquest. For our games, I guess the devil really is in the details. It's really in what you're experiencing moment to moment, the things you have to do to get to the next step. No matter what path you've taken to get to this next point where some major twist happens, or some major plot point is revealed, you have to make it feel right for the player, no matter how they got there. Whether it's the short route, the long route, the good path, the bad path.
Zeschuk: It's a challenge. That's why the writer's job is so much fun. It's different than writing a purely linear narrative like in a book or movie. They have to actually anticipate the player and plan all these paths. Kind of a make-your-own adventure.

We're in this place now where games are trying to be more like movies. But I guess you could look at one of the valuable difference in games is that you become the story, rearange it.
Muzyka: It's like you're in the movie.
Zeschuk: Yeah, and another interesting challenge that exists is finding that balance between cinematic gameplay and a lack of feeling in control. There are those certain games that go for that really cinematic feel, and you almost have this feeling of being swept along with the movie. You have these brief moments of interactivity, and then you're back on the track. That's what we want to avoid. The choices are what make things exciting. Some games give you very fake choices. I remember

The mythological meets the fantastical—
a feast for the eyes and the mind.

"You know, with the cinematic thing, we're actually now doing so much in-engine. These engines are so much more advanced."
-Dr. Ray Muzyka, co-producer, Jade Empire

those old Japanese RPGs were always hilarious. You were presented with the typical "yes-no" answer. You'd pick no, and then you'd get the question again. You say no again, you get the question again. Ok, yes! Good, let's move on.

Muzyka: You know, with the cinematic thing, we're actually now doing so much in-engine. These engines are so much more advanced. It actually really puts you in the scene. It's your character doing the actions, wearing the costume, whatever changes you've made to your character; it's your character, and you get to see that. That's a good way to handle the cinematic. Games need cinematic moments, but it's really important to make that personal for the player. In a role-playing game, particularly.

What have you come away from KOTOR learning?

Zeschuk: Jade's pacing is quite different from KOTOR's. Ray and I were talking a lot about pacing and the fact that it has an action component, you wanted it a little faster. A lot of time the new choices we make aren't necessarily to fix something, but to explore new space. I think a good example of that is the combat system. We were quite happy with the way the combat system turned out in Knights of the Old Republic; in fact, we think it's a great way to deliver that kind of detailed, multipurpose combat. We wanted to explore a different area, more of a pure action-driven combat. There's little things we're always exploring. There's some unique things we're doing with inventory. Style progression is unique, how you learn stuff.

Zeschuk: We want to make it accessible yet very deep.

Muzyka: We don't want to just make the same title with different dressing.

Which would be easy to do.

Muzyka: We're kind of exploring different things in these different games. It's really exciting from a creation perspective. And in many ways you're choosing your future dialogue by the choices you make.

Zeschuk: Defining who you are. As you define your character, you start taking on that role. No matter what kind of game we make, it'll be hard not to immediately think how we'd add that story element into it. I don't think we would want to make a totally different game. I think our talents as a company lie in merging that story and making a really complex, detailed experience. You don't want to get too detailed or complicated, and you want to maintain a wide range of experience.

What defines maturity?

Muzyka: Making meaningful choices. They're going to have impact on your followers. I don't want to give away some of the story, but there are points in the game where what you do affects the lives of people in the world, whether good or evil.

Zeschuk: I think the perspective we've taken is a definite respect for the subject matter. Our goal was to make something long-lasting. We were very thorough in our research. We really needed to make sure it all fit together, it all made sense, that nothing oddly stands out...

You said you wanted to do something with kung fu for a long time now. What is it that excites you about the subject matter?

Muzyka: You mentioned the world "elegant." It's mature, it can be funny, it's really exciting to watch, very action-oriented. I don't know; it is all just a very elegant thing. We wanted to make a combat system that fit that role, that allows you to become a martial arts master. It's all very beautiful to watch it unfold. The motion capture, it all kind of ties back together. For us, a lot of what games are about is fulfilling a fantasy or desire in real life we just can't...

Muzyka: It's very visceral. The way you...

It's primal but beautiful.
Muzyka: Kind of like that yin and yang.

Yeah, you can just keep on going deeper with the philosophy behind it.
Muzyka: There's moments of chaos, and there's moments of peace. You're walking through these beautiful, beautiful areas—definitely the most beautiful stuff we've created—but the next minute you're in the middle of this frenetic combat, and you're knocking people back, slamming them. It ends, bodies are on the ground, and it's very peaceful.

Going with the real-time combat, I can't imagine it any other way. It just wouldn't make sense with the flow of the subject matter.
Zeschuk: Yeah, this is definitely something that's not new to us, but certainly it is in the association with an RPG. I think, kind of with the audience too. If you think about the kind of role-playing games that existed, the only real action ones have kind of been in the frenetic, hack-and-slash ones. Nothing that's really as tactical. We wanted to create a thinking action-role-playing game, where you have to plan out your actions. That's the reason for harmonic combos, that's the reason for having style selections. When you're in combat, there is a challenge. You're trying to figure out a solution, of which there are many because of the emergence of the gameplay.
Muzyka: You play the game how you want; you become the martial arts master you want to become. Whether it's magic or weapons or martial arts. You can always be thinking about the options you have at your disposal and what tactic you want to focus on. Which style am I gonna add to when I level up next? Where am I going to put my points? Am I going to put it into magic like Dire Flame, am I going to try and get a better weapon?

An RPG really seems so perfect for this.
Muzyka: Yeah, it just seems so right. We've come to the conclusion, recently I think, the core vision of the game, the role-playing part of it has to be very compelling. In KOTOR, it was really compelling to become a Jedi, a good or evil Jedi—that was kind of the essence. And in Jade Empire, we think that there's an equally compelling—maybe even more, depends on the person, right?—[experience in learning to] become a marital arts master. Whatever that means to you, you can become that. That's pretty cool.
Zeschuk: The story really goes beyond that. It's one of power, and what do you do when you get incredible power, and what do you do with that. Not only are you this incredible martial arts master, but you have to decide how you're going to use it. That, for us, is kind of the magical combination of things you can do. We really want you not to put the game down and say, "Wow, what's going to happen next? What am I going to be able to do with what I've learned?" [It's about] these continuous surprises—so many options and opportunities. It's prett incredible. **play**

"It's different than writing a purely linear narrative like in a book or movie. They have to actually anticipate the player and plan all these paths. Kind of a make-your-own adventure."

-Greg Zeschuk, co-producer, Jade Empire

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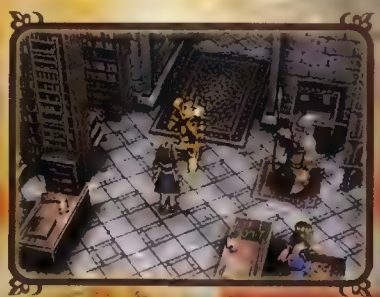

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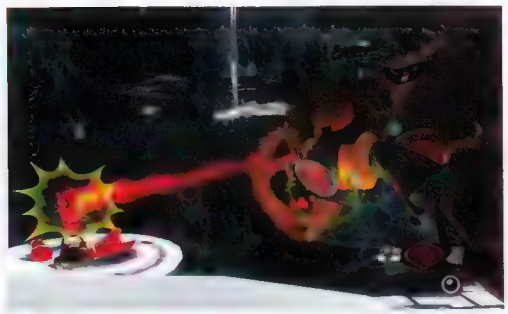
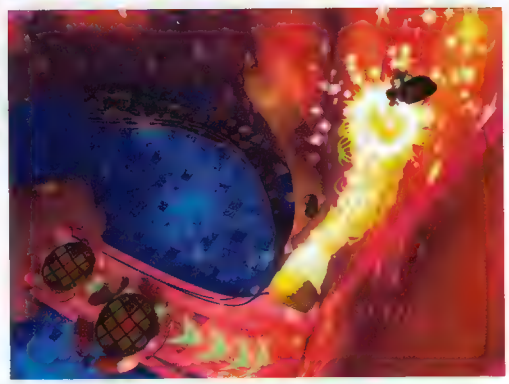
PSYCHONAUTS

Absolutely, positively not inside the action-platform box





Sigmund Freud believed we carried censors in our dreaming brains that stomp out psychotic thoughts before they have a chance to invade our conscious lives. Tim Schafer, known for wild flights of imagination in such graphic-adventure classics Grim Fandango and Monkey Island, believes in the elusive idea of surreal creativity, so he decided to make these and other studies of the subconscious mind his workshop for Psychonauts, a game where Freud's censors are enemies, emotional fragments are power-ups, and a youth camp for gifted psychics is a central hub.

One of the more capable telepathic freakazoids goes by the name of Raz. Raz grew up in the circus, and his head is oddly oversized for his spindly body, a necessary holding tank for a gigantic brain capable of extraordinary abilities like manipulating heavy objects and freezing people and lighting stuff on fire.

When friends and counselors are abruptly kidnapped by a giant—what the hell is that thing?—a giant bad guy bent on harvesting their enormous mental energy for death and destruction, Raz is off to play precocious savior for the day. His battleground is the off-kilter imaginations of various characters in need of severe cleansing, like the deranged artist Edgar, whose fractured, delirious paintings become a phantasmagoric world to pick apart. Developing new psychic powers by piecing together mind fragments and dispensing emotional baggage manifested as bizarre enemies is only a part of the action-platforming puzzle. Above all the unbound creativity the theme opens for the gamemakers, fully carving out the settings and their surreal inhabitants through sly, multilayered conversations is Double Fine's most notable commitment—something wildly original and carrying an expressively personal stamp Tim Schafer's adamant about maintaining. **Brady Fiechter**

System: Xbox, PlayStation 2, PC
Developer: Double Fine
Publisher: Majesco
Available: 2005

"His battleground is the off-kilter imaginations of various characters in need of severe cleansing..."

Tim Schaefer...brilliant, insane, or a little of both? Apparently the ladder applies.

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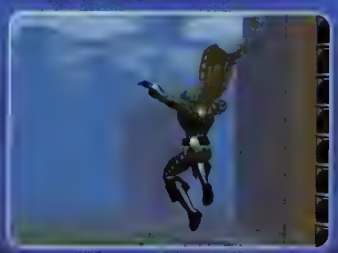

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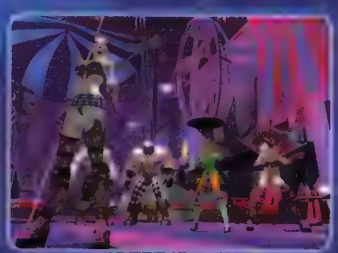

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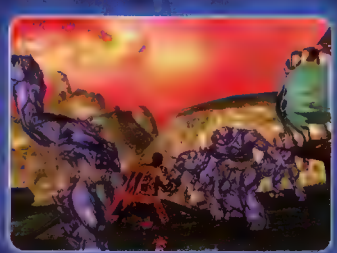

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Tork

Tiwak's heady hero finally takes the stage

"More of the same only better has, and always will be, a very good thing. It's gotten us this far."

Tork was my pick for game of the show, E3...2002! Back then, the nearly completed game was to be Microsoft's platforming juggernaut. We were on track to do the cover story and all was well in critterville; a Bonk for a new generation was approaching, starring in one of the most breathtaking games I'd ever seen. And then, just as we were about to grab the kid by the horns, I got the call: "I've got good news and bad news," the MGS delegate warbled. "The bad news is that we've dropped Tork, but the good news is that we want to give you the exclusive on the game that's taking its place, which is also right up your alley." That game was Voodoo Vince. As the lone depository for anything with a jump button, we gladly accepted. On the one hand, Vince was (and is) pure gaming satisfaction, and so all was leaning in the direction of well. After all, two hot platformers were better than one. But on the other, as time wore on, it became clear that due to the genre dropping off a bit, as the press decided it was open season on anything that didn't either bleed, punt or go to war, Tork, it seemed, might have a tough time finding a home.

You see, the funny thing about platformers (a term that no longer fits the kind) is the way they're constantly unfairly scrutinized for being "just another platformer" or "more of the same." Compared to what? Football games? First-person shooters? War games? Tony flippin' Hawk 10? As if there's something wrong with simple, fun gameplay. Some things aren't meant to constantly evolve. More of the same only better has, and always will be, a very good thing. It's gotten us this far. Tork isn't rocket science—no high-concept stuff here—it's just a really cool, really fun, exceptionally beautiful game where you jump around, kill stuff, run from monsters (and after them), traverse time and

negotiate treacherous terrain trying to rescue your dad, brought to you with the finest detail and art imaginable, ultra responsive controls, great physics and one cool little cave dude. If you have 20 dollars in your pocket (and an Xbox), I can't think of a better way to spend it.

In the end, Microsoft wasn't necessarily the right home for Vince or Tork, as they just don't seem to have the right machinery to market platformers. But at least Vince came out. All I've cared about since (besides a sequel, which I'll probably never see because MGS retained the rights) was getting my hands on Tork. That day has finally arrived.

I struck up a relationship with Tiwak president and lead producer Yann Le Tensorer just after the Microsoft deal fell through, and we've remained in contact for the duration…
Dave Halverson

System: Xbox
Developer: Tiwak
Publisher: Ubisoft
Available: January

"We actually had to stop working on the PS2 at that time and make the game Xbox-only, which was a really tough choice..."

-Yann Le Tensorer, lead programmer, Tork

Interview

Yann Le Tensorer, Tiwak president and lead programmer on Tork

play: So my game of the show 2002 finally arrives. I feel like I've reached a milestone in my life having finally played this game…
Yann Le Tensorer: I hope you weren't disappointed…

Please… Before we get into it, can you elaborate on Tiwak itself? How the team began and where you came from?
We began in August 2000 as part of the core team of Rayman 2 (and 1 for some of us). I was the lead programmer for Rayman 1 and 2, and Jean-Christophe Alessandri was the lead artist for Rayman 2 and one of the senior artists for Rayman 1. We wanted to keep on making great platform games afterwards because we love the genre and had the idea that the games could keep selling and be very fun to play. Even though the market proves that the genre isn't the most successful today, we had a great time doing Tork.

Hard to believe this is a 20 dollar game. Microsoft's loss is your gain. Go get some!

You know, a big part of that is the press, as they've all fallen in line behind the bigger titles. I don't see them as going away or not doing big numbers. I think they can and will in the future, I just think that, in this country at least, we need a press that's more receptive. There's a sizeable audience out there for platformers—millions of them—but they haven't really been represented all that well. So Tork was to be your masterpiece—how did it become a first-party Xbox title? Did you pitch it to them?
We planned to ship Tork with another publisher and had started a relationship. Then Microsoft came to us when we announced the creation of Tiwak and said they would be interested in talking to us if we had a title in the platform genre. At first I told them we weren't interested because we already had a publisher. But they convinced us to at least hear them out, so we talked and finally they convinced us that they could help us more than the publisher we had at that time to start a company, and that they would be a very good partner [we both begin laughing]. They were good at convincing us…

Yeah, they were good at convincing a lot of people in those days…
We actually had to stop working on the PS2 at that time

and make the game Xbox only, which was a really tough choice because we weren't really Xbox programmers at that time.

Wow; you'd never know it by looking at the game. Could this even be done on PS2?
I don't think on the PS2 that you'd be able to have the same quality, but at the very beginning it was planned for PS2.

So when Microsoft, er, switched gears, did that affect how the game came out in any way?
Not really; what happened was that we ended up with a small cash problem, with just enough to finish the game. Unfortunately we had to fire some people. While I started talking to other publishers, we were finishing the game on our own, but we kept what we had in mind. We were almost finished when Microsoft broke the deal... It wasn't because we were late or anything like that...it was just because they probably had a different portfolio or trade off to do...

Seems like they did it because of Rare.
That's what they told me was one of the big reasons, because they bought Rare and had many titles in the same genre. They had to make choices and wanted to concentrate on Rare titles. We actually just finished Tork and signed a deal—a purchase deal, not just a publishing deal, and have begun working on other new titles that aren't announced yet.

So Tiwak is back with Ubisoft...
It's Tiwak, but now it's a 100-person department for Ubisoft. They're probably not going to keep it Tiwak since we're now making Ubisoft games.

I hope they know how lucky they are. Your team has some of the best artists and programmers working in games today. I mean, these levels...as long and filled with fine detail as they are...there's really no other platformer quite like this. It's really a testament to you guys that all these years later nothing else looks this good.
Thanks, Dave, thanks. I should record you and let the team hear your voice. They would be very happy.

Tork is a value title now in America—which is insane—so I guess there's probably not going to be much of a marketing push. It'll be more of a grass roots game. But if it flourishes—and I don't know what Ubisoft considers a hit or a miss—is there any chance that Tork will ever ride again?
It depends on the sales. If the sales department is proven wrong and we have big sales, I think Ubisoft would consider doing something more with Tork. But if the sales are limited, there probably won't be a sequel. It would be quite risky as currently these types of games are not what are selling the most.

Put a hip-hop soundtrack in it and a gun and you'll sell a million copies... There is a middle ground though. Look at Fable: it's an original work of fantasy and it's sold 600,000 copies so far, so not everything has to be a license... Whatever you guys are working on, I'm sure it will be amazing. For what it's worth, I think Microsoft is crazy for letting Tork go. I think with the proper marketing and care, Tork could sell in the hundreds of thousands. Nintendo's doing it...and look at Tak; it sold a million copies because it's got Nick behind it and THQ marketed it properly. If you lead people to the well, they'll still drink...but you have to know how to market these types of games. You need to avoid parts of the U.S. press like the plague; get your message out with the right outlets early and get the right marketing out there. They can still hit big...
I hope you're right...

I hope I'm right too...Blinx 2, Kameo and Conker are on the way. Getting back to the game, we're used to hubs made up of two or three like environments, but in Tork, each hub houses three distinctly different vast branching levels...long levels, full of nuances. It must be difficult to build a game like this where you're streaming so much information all the time.
We wanted an experience that changes all the time for the player, thinking that having to do the same thing all the time in the same environment is not good. We wanted to have each level be a new environment, which was quite a challenge; it's a lot of data to produce, which is why we created these tools...these very good tools. But it paid off. When you play Tork, you see change all the time...new levels, new monsters...it's hard to get bored when you play it, I think.

Even within the levels themselves, you change the terrain to a great degree. When you get to places like Frost Bites and see that huge migration of creatures sliding over the ice...I must have stood there for 10 minutes looking at the reflections...and when I got to the cemetery...oh my God...it's unbelievable.
Yes, the cemetery is beautiful. We're so happy everything worked out.

All those years ago at E3 when we sat down for the first time, you were speaking a lot about dynamic difficulty. Did it get in?
Not in the finished product. It's something we wanted to push at the time, but it was quite difficult and we had to make choices so we chose to make Tork average difficulty. At first it was too hard; after play testing it we toned it down a bit.

It ramps up slowly, but towards the end it gets pretty intense. The Machine Master is certainly a pain...
Yeah, we'd love to have tweaked a little more...some bosses are perhaps a little bit difficult. We didn't have the budget to tweak everything we wanted.

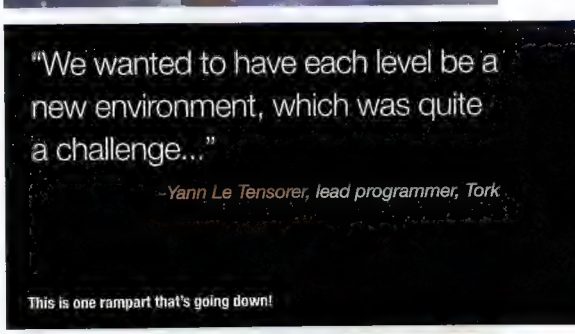
In a game like this where the payoff is so big because the game is so beautiful, a little difficulty is a good thing...you want to get to that next hub so bad. Plus, I like the way you check-mark the first half of each level or boss so you don't have to fight through over and over. Like the Machine Master—he's not that hard until he gets into the dome and even then he's easy to hit...until you get him down to about 1/4 energy; then he gets nasty. It's a great game. I think that anyone who plays it is going to be very happy...it's our job now to get the word out. I mean, this was to be a first-party MGS title and now it's a value title...
I'm very happy to hear this, and that Ubisoft is distributing the game, even if it is a value title.

Whatever you're working on now...are you happy?
Oh yes, we're very happy—it's very exciting. It's different. I cannot tell you, of course, what kind of title it is, because it's not announced yet, but it's a very cool game and will be really innovative...I'm very confident. I'm happy because it's going to be quite a big team and since I am the producer, I have a lot of work to do! Everyone is very happy now actually working...after the difficult times when Microsoft dropped... "We'll buy you...we love you," they said. Now everyone is happy. You've been a great supporter of ours for many years. It was very important for us to see people who believed in what we were doing, and you were one of them.

When I see something this beautiful get treated the way it did, well, you have to go on a crusade for titles like Tork because we can't lose this in this industry. If we do, I fear that once all this commercial crap fizzles out, we're gonna be sitting here scratching our heads, and we want to make sure that doesn't happen.

"We wanted to have each level be a new environment, which was quite a challenge..."

–Yann Le Tensorer, lead programmer, Tork



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Scrapland

Roaming charges don't apply

As more and more games adopt the GTA 3 world game formula, none have merged it with the classic adventure elements of a Willy Beamish or Monkey Island until now, and the end result is intriguing to say the least. Executive producer American McGee's take on the genre is certainly an interesting one: "The intention was to create a viable and compelling world in which to tell a story. Whenever a game goes down this path, it is almost guaranteed to be compared to the GTA games, which is testament to the quality and impact of that franchise."

Scrapland is, however, also one less versed in wholesale violence and rife with exploring a living future novella. "The level of violence flows naturally from the story that was created for Scrapland," McGee says. "It's not that we were trying to make a toned-down product. The violence fits the story as does the depth and scale of the world. I think people who play this game are going to find it very satisfying, immersive and even inspiring." To that I can attest: while immersion into this extremely deep and layered universe is a slow burn, once you arrive, it's so riveting that you can almost hear your own internal hard drive whirling. Token radar and navigation

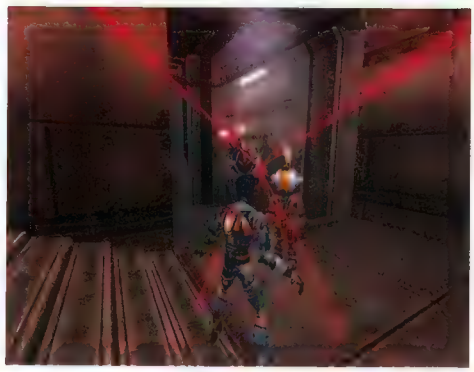
> "...all around you is a living robo-tropolis drenched in classes, laws, hierarchy, traffic, crime, illegal gaming and fresh off the rack: murder."

may point the way to the set course, but all around you is a living robo-tropolis drenched in classes, laws, hierarchy, traffic, crime, illegal gaming and fresh off the rack: murder. Up until recently, any premature termination in Scrapland (ie death) was easily rectified by instantly reloading the unfortunate victim into the world, but as the game gets underway, someone is terminating citizens after stealing their data, and that's virtual murder. Strictly by chance, our lead robot, the inquisitive D-Tntus, ends up investigating these occurrences and so begins one of the most visually arresting and immersive action adventures ever realized on a game console. Someone *loves* robots and knows how to back it up. I asked McGee if Scrapland has franchise implications: "The franchise possibility is open. We're about to start the process of shopping Scrapland as a film. A sequel might also make sense, but we're going to have to see how this first one is received before we make that decision."

Flying around the massive cityscape, in awe of its twisting skyways and *Jetsons*-like hovering burbs, you can't help but think about a film, toys, a TV series... Scrapland is everything Reboot was back in the day only all grown up, fleshed out and imminently cooler. The adventuring is forged on D-Tritus' ability to hack The Great Database and assume the identity of up to 15 different robot personas of varying classes. For instance, in order to gain access to a secure location or crime scene, Tritus may implant himself onto a police robot or other official granted entrance. And while identity theft itself is nothing new, it's how American McGee takes it a step further that counts, by adding paranoia and stealth to the equation. Certain seer robots can see through a hacked disguise and so layered within any recon is the fear of being discovered, which poses yet another plethora of problems. And should you run into the robot you're impersonating, mechanized mayhem breaks out, as deadly as it is fascinating to behold. If you love robots, this game represents your finest hour. In between missions, in order to earn money to upgrade your growing quiver of spacecraft, racing and/or missions take center stage, along with "Crazy Bets"—dares from the local organized crime faction attached to ever-useful rewards. And should you prefer to venture outside the straight and narrow, you can drop into facilities and soak up intelligence for hours on end. States McGee: "Someone making a point to get through the game as quickly as possible would still find themselves in for around 25 hours of gameplay. If you're taking a more leisurely approach, you could find anywhere from 40 to 60 hours of gameplay. Scrapland presents players with a lot to do outside of the main story arc."

After a few hours of gameplay, two things are crystal clear: this is a unique and intoxicating take on world gaming that adventure gamers are going to love, and it's set in one of the most detailed and interactive universes ever devised. Enric Alvarez, the game's lead designer, elaborates: "I've always been fascinated by robot tales. I especially love those that 1) feature believable robotic societies and 2) deal with the duality of human/robot from a funny and deep point of view. The emergent structure and free-form gameplay of Scrapland arise from point 1. The sense of humor, storyline and character design arise from point 2." Point taken: Scrapland is shaping up to be one of '05's most promising new Xbox titles. **Dave Halverson**

System: Xbox
Developer: Mercury Steam
Publisher: Enlight Interactive
Available: January 2005



Seers scan for identity hackers...luckily, D-Tritus is true to form.

GoldenEye
Rogue Agent
The darker shades of Bond

Whether GoldenEye: Rogue Agent can achieve the same respect its predecessor rightfully enjoyed on N64 doesn't really matter. This powerhouse first-person shooter succeeds on its own unique terms. First off, it's visually eye-popping, using color and light to create an unusually dense 3D space. Secondly, it plays great, employing an incredibly advanced physics and AI routine and nailing the feeling of violent deaths; the presence of murderous traps is a unique angle to the carnage. It is indeed darker than what you'd expect, immediately coming off as an unusually jolting experience for a Bond game. Thirdly, in the spirit of the first game's archetypal multiplayer battles, GoldenEye: Rogue Agent is going all-out for its online play. Senior producer Chris Plummer breaks it all down in the following interview. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Electronic Arts
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: November

"This powerhouse first-person shooter succeeds on its own unique terms."

Interview
Chris Plummer, senior producer, Electronic Arts

play: So for the first time in a Bond game, you get to play the villain. How'd you end up running with this idea?
Chris Plummer: We've been interested in building a first-person shooter for the Bond franchise that held the same style of the original GoldenEye for a while. Shooter fans have been waiting for this particular gameplay style and we knew we had the license to do it, but had to figure out exactly how to make it happen and be the best experience for players. At the same time, there were several ideas floating around about making a game about a Bond villain, since the villains are the ones who really define the Bond universe. They have all the women, the sinister plots, the superpower wealth and incredible firepower—all the core elements that define the world in which Bond exists.

Today, James Bond is a lot more about stealth and fast cars as opposed to classic first-person shooting, so there was a disconnect between 007's character and the first-person shooter style of gameplay we wanted to deliver. Therefore, the idea to put a villainous twist to the game became clear. We decided to steer further away from stealth gameplay in favor of more intense action—the kind of behavior that comes natural when playing as a villain. GoldenEye: Rogue Agent allows players to take action that would not be suitable for Bond, such as using enemies as shields or blowing up Hoover dam.

Is this darker lean on the story inspiring a unique angle to the gameplay?
The evil twist in the story definitely allows for a unique style of gameplay. Gameplay mechanics that support the villainous angle include exploiting vulnerable allies when the action gets too hot, throwing opponents over railings, taking an enemy as a hostage and using them as a shield or deploying deathtraps to take out enemies at every chance. A lot of our weapons are designed with villainy in mind too, like the Venom Injector that stuns enemies in their tracks, to be exploited as the player sees fit, and the Mag Rail gun, which can shoot enemies hiding behind walls (great when combined with the GoldenEye's MRI vision).

How much liberty are you taking with the Bond universe? Are you going for a very recognizable setting, pulling much from the films and characters?
Rogue Agent features the most authentic take on the Bond universe to date in an interactive space. There are four super villains in Rogue Agent that also appeared in film, plus additional henchmen and supporting cast members who will be familiar to Bond movie fans. The player will encounter several villains during the game, including Auric Goldfinger, Dr. No, Oddjob, Francisco Scaramanga, Xenia Onatopp, Number One and, of course, Pussy Galore. These characters alone span decades of infamous Bond films and it has been great to revive their villainous roles.Sir Ken Adam, the Academy Award-winning production designer who crafted the look of the Bond universe in film, lent his timeless vision to the game… A few of Ken's more memorable settings players will recognize are Fort Knox, Number One's Volcano lair, Francisco Scaramanga's Funhouse from *The Man with the Golden Gun*, and the Moonraker launch facility from the film of the same name. Ken also helped us design all new locations that are unique to our game, such as a re-envisioned Auric Enterprises, a luxurious bathhouse in Hong Kong and The Octopus undersea black market.

You guys have some fairly unique talent working on the game? Isn't there even someone from the *Matrix* movie production department involved?
…Kym Barrett's stylistic contributions lend the necessary villainous flavor to the look of our key characters. She designed the costumes for the *Matrix* films and knew the cinematic feel we were looking for. Rene Morel's models are such powerful, life-like replicas of infamous Bond villains that you actually feel as if they are in the flesh.

The development team is made up of all-stars we handpicked from around the industry and within EA's worldwide organization. All major disciplines are headed up by industry leaders in their respective fields. This includes lead design talent from Halo, art direction from feature films, programming leads from Splinter Cell and Medal of Honor, character design from Silent Hill and animation talent from Madden football. There's so much talent on this team.

What's the multiplayer angle? Is your focus here or on the single-player?
Multiplayer is a huge part of Rogue Agent and we placed a large amount of focus on this right off the bat. It makes up about half of the content in the game. Multiplayer is all about the competition and the bragging rights. The game will ship with over 20 multiplayer arenas and take you to famous Bond film locations as well as original environments designed by Sir Ken Adam.

All of our core mechanics work in solo and multiplayer modes. The weapons and GoldenEye features are tuned slightly differently in multiplay, but the tricks you learn playing the campaign will help you in multiplay and vice versa. A few of the multiplayer modes include team vs. team showdowns, domination mode, where two teams fight to control a mission objective, tug-o-war, where two teams

battle to transport a moving objective to their base and, of course, free-for-all death-matches where it's everyone for themselves.

The GoldenEye name is, of course, iconic in gaming circles. Are you referencing Rare's classic at all?
Although our storylines are quite different, GoldenEye: Rogue Agent is something of a spiritual successor to the original GoldenEye in terms of the gameplay style and Bond universe setting. Everyone on this team is a big fan of the original and takes the responsibility of living up to that name quite seriously.

The original classic was infamous for its excellent multiplayer gameplay, and we put a huge focus on our multiplayer experience for Rogue Agent. The game features several maps, modes and unlockables that fans of the original will appreciate. Another feature that evolved from the original game early on is our dual-weapon system. It was always fun to pick up two weapons, but we took that to the next level of depth with independent triggers and the ability to mix and match a variety of dual-wield weapons for over 100 combinations. This two-fisted arsenal can be customized to be lethal in any encounter.

Lastly, I always thought it was really innovative to be able to pull off headshots in the original GoldenEye and ever since, all shooters have emulated this. We took this idea a step further by rewarding players who play with skill. We call it Rogue Bonuses. Melee throws, knocking an enemy out, taking out opponents with deathtraps and other stylistic ways of eliminating enemies are rewarded to reinforce the idea of playing like a villain.

It's being billed as an FPS, but how would you break down the game's gameplay thrust?
Rogue Agent is a predatory-style FPS where the emphasis is on being the hunter or the hunted and covered gunfights where tactics matter. It's not about stealth and it's not about charging your enemies either (the latter will get you killed really fast); it's about moving and using cover and attacking opportunistically while your enemies do the same. But the real depth comes from the choices you have to make during a gunfight, because you don't holster a dozen weapons, you have to scavenge them from your enemies and, when you're finished, you throw the weapon away and grab something else, so tactical decisions involving your dual weapon combination become critically important. Your GoldenEye abilities also play an important role, because the further you get into the game, the more you'll need to rely on your GoldenEye in order to survive a given encounter. We're not dictating which GoldenEye ability you need to use, but you will definitely need to take advantage of this powerful feature as you progress into the game. Finally, the melee system offers another branch of tactics, because once you close in tight, you can either take an enemy out with a decisive melee attack combination or take him hostage for "mobile cover" as a human shield. Once you have a hostage, you can throw him at other enemies, knocking them all down and making them vulnerable. So each of these mechanics opens up opportunities for the player, and since the AI never reacts the same way twice, you get tons of replayability and opportunities to try and perfect different tactics.

EVIL AI. What's that all about?
We developed an all-new AI for Rogue Agent, as we knew the enemies had to be intuitive, unpredictable and extreme. We also needed a pretty advanced AI in order to get the covered gun battles and unscripted replayability that we were shooting for. To better explain, here's how the acronym breaks down…
E: Emotion-based. The AI behaviors are motivated by human emotions simulated in real time rather than scripting. That can lead to very believable yet unpredictable behavior. Each AI has independently driven emotions that are influenced by what the player is doing, so no two battles will ever unfold exactly the same way.
V: Visceral, because we wanted the cinematic moments to be delivered via the AI rather than through scripted sequences that always happen at a predictable moment. In most shooters, when something cool happens, it always happens at exactly the same place and time every time the game is played. In Rogue Agent, if an enemy commander grabs one of his own as a human shield, that won't be scripted; it will emerge from the AI because the player was intimidating the hell out of that commander (probably by playing like a villain) and so he lost his cool and took extreme measures. Players will call up their friends to explain what happened and that friend will have a totally different story about the same encounter. This is one of the huge benefits of our AI system.
I: Intelligence. For the style of play in Rogue Agent, it was important for the AIs to be intelligent about their surroundings. Using cover is an important part of our gameplay and the AIs are very smart about using it, especially the higher-level guys. They're also capable of using machine traps and other environmental hazards against the player. Most importantly, they do all of these smart things without cheating. Just turn on the GoldenEye's MRI vision and sneak up on a guy after he loses sight of you—you'll see they don't cheat. They're just really intelligent.
L: Learning. The AIs learn and respond to changes in their environments and situations. If there's a commander in the area, the AIs will benefit from more advanced group behaviors. If a player blows away a chunk of cover, the AIs learn that and won't try to take cover there anymore. And the player will learn by watching the AI. The player might not realize there's a deathtrap in the room until the AIs use it on them first. **play**

"Everyone on this team is a big fan of the original and takes the responsibility of living up to that name quite seriously."

–Chris Plummer, senior producer, Electronic Arts

There's a lot more to Rogue Agent than running and gunning, such as using hostages as shields.

Darkwatch

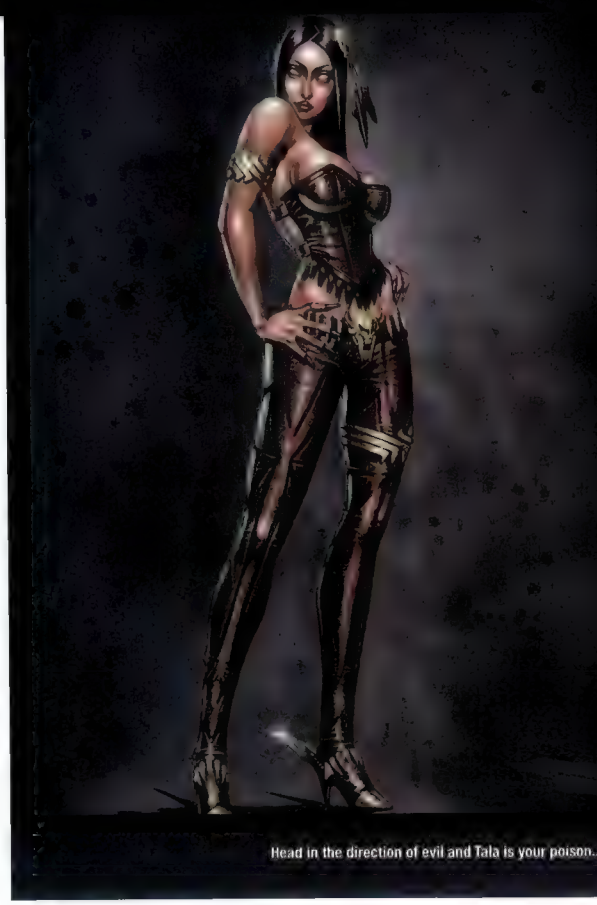
Rider on the storm

Like so many red-blooded Americans, I have a proclivity for Gothic horror, Westerns, vampires, creepy anime and manga, any gameplay on horseback and everyone's favorite: evil vixens. However, the thought of anyone plugging all of the above into a single game seemed about as likely as a Doors reunion. Well, maybe Jim didn't really gargle his own juices, because Sammy's internal dream team's first game, Darkwatch, packs all of that and more into a first-person shooter that's actually fresh…yes, you heard right: a fresh FPS.

In Darkwatch, you play as Jericho Cross, a train robber who decides to make one last score before heading south of the border, only to find himself on the wrong train at the wrong time…the Darkwatch train, property of an ancient organization dedicated to the disposal of supernatural evil, and its cargo this fateful day is a vampire lord being transported to their citadel for interrogation. Not only does Jericho end up letting evil out of the proverbial bag, but he's sucked dry in the process and left for dead. Waking up, weakened, the vampire lord free, Cassidy, a beautiful Darkwatch agent, comes to his aid and directs him to the citadel where they have methods to stop the vampiric infection. However, upon news of his survival, the vampire lord raises an undead army to throw a stake into the heart of his plan. Newly inducted into Darkwatch as their secret weapon, as Jericho slowly begins to turn, he must defeat the vampire lord who sired him or spend eternity as a soulless ghoul and watch America come under the rule of evil. So the stakes are high; pun intended.

What sets Darkwatch apart, at least based on the levels we played—Boot Hill, a cemetery's worth of undead target practice, and Iron Horse, a harrowing pony ride by moonlight picking off reapers and undead riders before boarding the Darkwatch train—can be found in nearly every facet of the game, beginning with the art. You don't realize how important or powerful real art can be until you see it in action. So many games place too much emphasis on the main characters, leaving the ones in your sights to fend for their polygonally challenged selves…not here. Banshees, Oozers, Reapers and assorted undead ghouls blow up real good, but look their demonic best before you send them back to hell. And the environments are equally outstanding. The PS2 textures look like Xbox and the Xbox looks like PC. Darkwatch could live well on its graphics and ambience alone, but these are merely set dressing for gameplay that'll have you wishing it would never end; and it practically doesn't. Jericho comes with a gaggle of vampiric WMDs like the Darkwatch Redeemer Pistol, Sniper Rifle, Argus Shotgun and Crossbow, but what gives him that extra boost is the eerily agile vampire double jump, Blood Vision and using Brands, obtained by making key decisions with a full Blood Gauge. At key intervals in the game, Jericho is given a choice to either help or kill human prey—one choice leads him in the path of the deadly sexy Tala (and reportedly the first real in-game sexual encounter), one towards the good girl Cassidy and one right up the middle. So you'll need to play the game at least three times to see where it all leads. I don't see a problem with that. **Dave Halverson**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Sammy Studios
Publisher: Sammy Studios
Available: March 2005

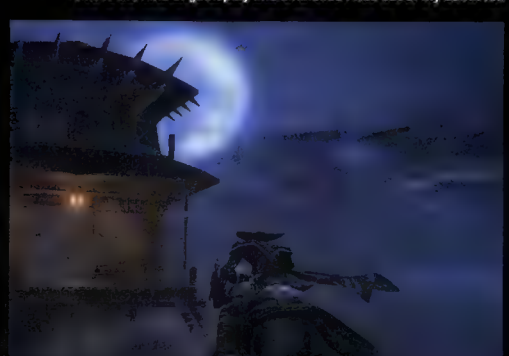


Head in the direction of evil and Tala is your poison…

This is the kind of gameplay and ambience I rise out of my coffin for.

"Not only does Jericho end up letting evil out of the proverbial bag, but he's sucked dry in the process and left for dead."

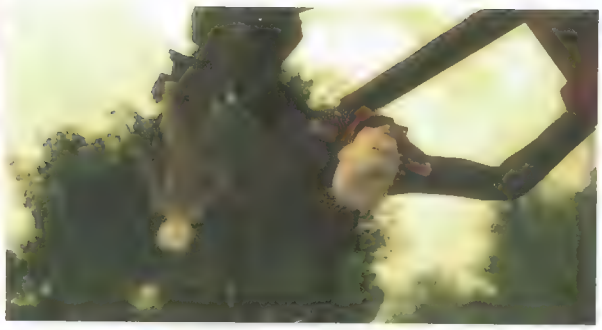
Would-be retired train robber Jericho is now hell-bent for leather and vampire stew.



MGS3

SNAKE EATER

Operation: Snake Eater has commenced. Snake—the man who will come to be known as Big Boss—has already entered into foreign territory on his mission to rescue Russian defector Dr. Sokolov...and Metal Gear Solid 3 has already crept into stores. Konami, in their infinite wisdom, has decided that our review won't hit until next issue, but in case you're still on the fence, here are five good reasons to get excited about the latest in the series that defines the stealth genre.



1 MORE ACTION

Even though stealth and camouflage are the main components of the MGS gameplay experience, Snake now has more ways than ever to deal with enemies if he gets spotted—definitely a good thing, since it's more difficult to avoid detection without the traditional radar. The much-hyped CQC (close-quarters combat) moves deal satisfying pain to enemies even when Snake's unarmed, and abilities like using a prone enemy as a shield assure that Snake has a fighting chance against any foes. As always, a diverse array of weaponry becomes available throughout the mission, including grenades, mines, an AK-47 assault rifle, an M-37 shotgun, an experimental M-16 and an SVD sniper rifle.

2 STORYLINE

The story of MGS3 had been kept tightly under wraps, but now that its full scope has become apparent, it's clear that another tantalizing web of intrigue and betrayal is waiting to ensnare gamers. Not only does it create another immersive, believable world, this time based around true events of the Cold War era, but it also delves deep into the Metal Gear universe, providing insight into Big Boss, along with interesting parallels between him and Solid Snake. Impatient gamers can skip the cutscenes if they wish.

3 CHARACTERS

The title, Snake Eater, isn't just about Snake's reliance on consuming reptiles for survival; it's also due to the fact that his main enemies consist of the Cobra Unit—a team of impossibly skilled soldiers who fought for the Allies in World War II, now enemies of the United States. This band of freaks includes The Pain, a man who controls clouds of hornets; The Fury, armed with a flamethrower; The Fear, who possesses chameleon-like abilities, including a whip-like tongue; The Sorrow, who makes his enemies' pasts come back to haunt them; and The End, a seemingly withered old man who lives only to bring death to others. On the other side of the spectrum is the sexy, seductive (and partially undressed) Eva, a double agent who may bring some warmth into Snake's cold heart.

4 THE DETAILS

It's the small touches that have made Hideo Kojima's games such hits, and MGS3 is no different. Medical procedures provide a new way for healing wounds, such as using a knife to dig out bullets or a cigar to burn away stamina-sucking leeches, accompanied by animations of the acts taking place, complete with Snake screaming in pain. Similarly detailed scenes occur when Snake bites into his prey. Other intricate touches include extremely atmospheric time-of-day effects and traps that reinforce the jungle setting.

5 SNAKE vs. APE

And on the lighter side of things, the bonus Snake vs. Ape mode features the true Solid Snake pitting his skills against...a small army of monkeys from Sony's Ape Escape series. We don't know how it happened, but aside from being a fun minigame, this mode also offers highly entertaining dialogue, including Snake's suggestion that Gabe or Sam might be more interested in the job.

Of course, these elements only scratch the surface of Metal Gear Solid 3, and what lies in its depths promises to only get better (a few camera issues aside). We can't say just yet if MGS3 will live up to all the hype, but it's a pretty sure bet that Metal Gear fans will be impressed. **CH**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: KCE Japan
Publisher: Konami
Available: November

"It's the small touches that have made Hideo Kojima's games such hits, and MGS3 is no different."

Swamp environments make up a fair chunk of MGS3. They contain their own unique dangers.

MechAssault 2
LONE WOLF

Building a better mech

Assault Suit Leynos, Cybernator, Armored Core, GunGriffon, MS Gundam, MechWarrior, Steel Battalion...the list goes on and on. Gamers have been awestruck by mobile suits of mass destruction since the glory days of 16-bit, but an overhaul has been long in coming. While boarding mechanical behemoths and embarking on mission ops of all shapes and sizes has always been a worthwhile endeavor, Day 1 Studios has put their best mechanics on some much-needed genre maintenance, emerging with some fresh ideas and hopefully the precursor for mech games to come.

Setting aside the multiplayer and online features until further review (although in a separate play test, we found both exceptional), the single-player campaign offers by far the best mission structure, real-time cinemas, play mechanics and especially detail the genre has ever seen. MechAssault 2 raises the bar at every turn. You begin the campaign in familiar 31st-century city surroundings sheathed in the new Battle Armor—a strong and nimble but diminutive mobile suit that's easy to get in and out of... which you'll be doing a lot of. MechAssault 2 goes where no mech action game has gone before: everywhere. Jump-jet and latch onto an enemy unit and you can hack it, leave your suit, scurry over to it and board it. This single aspect of the game, which is skillfully woven into the mission structure, provides a sense of scope and magnitude that renders the competition obsolete. Stepping (or in most cases climbing) out of your machine and into vast alien worlds that look as good on foot as they do in-mech dramatically enhances this type of gameplay. But they didn't stop there. Within the roughly two-hour campaign demo, I partook in a tank maneuver so perfectly tuned it could support an entire game, hung from a drop ship for

By taking the mech warrior out of the mech, Day 1 has evolved the kind. Putting him in a tank doesn't hurt either...

deployment above an enemy encampment where I was dropped on a perch to lob mortars, clear a path, jump-jet down and boost one of their mechs. An invigorating experience to say the least, made all the more so by the stunning visual presentation and intuitive controls. The attention to detail in MechAssault 2 borders on absurd for the kind: water, fog, vegetation, textures, surface effects, smoke trails and cinemas (sporting real-time models detailed down to the eyelashes) all look spectacular, and in terms of inertia and physics, prepare to be amazed. Hit a concrete bunker with your laser cannon and, rather than blow it up, it'll burn a detailed hole through both sides, and the implosions, as exploding machines bend and warp the surrounding terrain, seem to reverberate right up your spine. These Xbox sequels are getting scary... When MGS commits to a franchise (which isn't often), they don't mess around. Dave Halverson

System: Xbox
Developer: Day 1 Studios
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Available: December

4 Resident Evil

A new dawn for the undead

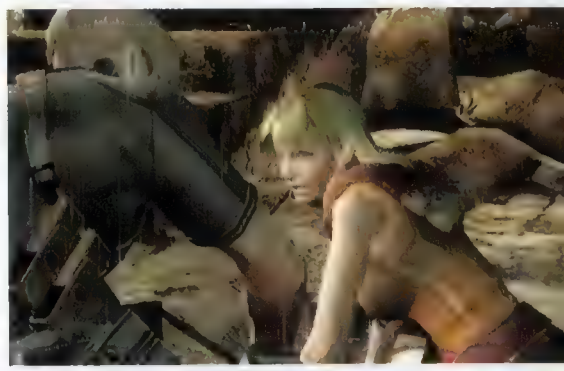
We use so many expletives in this profession like "amazing," "incredible," "awesome" and "spectacular," that I often find myself at a loss when I am truly struck by the extraordinary—by something like Resident Evil 4. So how about this: Resident Evil 4 is a system exclusive so omni-significant that if it was the only game available for the console it would be reason alone to buy it, whatever the cost. I honestly feel like it should cost more than other games to signify just how superior it is. I'd pay 100 dollars or more for RE4 without batting an eye, because in the world of realistic-looking and/or adventure-horror games, it doesn't just eclipse the competition, it grinds them into the dirt with the heel of its worn Adidas. I say this not as a fan (I'm not particularly fond of footlockers, hyper-limited ammo and limited control), but as someone who has come to this series only on occasion: if it were to be released this year, it would likely be my pick for game of 2004. As if I need to sell you further, here's some actual tangible information…

The Umbrella Corporation long gone, the series endeavors to move out of the bio-chemical mutation quagmire and into legitimate horror, and what better place to do it than a bleak wooded stretch of Europe where a group of religious fanatics have taken the President's daughter hostage. U.S. agent Leon Kennedy gets the recon call and is dropped off pretty much deep in the middle of nowhere…alone to soak in the first mesmerizing glance at a game world that raises some serious questions about the Cube—like why on Earth so many publishers have turned their backs on it. RE4 is like a big, outstretched middle finger to the lot of them. Newly invigorated with a monetary system (and requisite merchant), some twists to the action, weapons tuning, interactive environments, quick reload and (sorry, Snake) the ability to kill small prey for items and health, it's a brand new beautiful day for Resident Evil.

One of the first things you see after your first run-in with the game's hybrid-zombies (they run, throw weapons and dodge now; yippee) is the officer who dropped you off, crucified, burning at the stake in the town square…never a good sign. Boxed into what appears to be an old-world ramshackle Mexican parish, its red-eyed residents let out blood-curdling screams of ghoulish gibberish at the sight of you and take chase…hags with pitchforks, sickle-flinging farmhands and one particularly disturbing pursuer, the RE4 version of Leather Face. If he catches you, he saws off your head in about a second, so…run. Hence, one of the things I really love about RE4: fences do not act as roadblocks—you can jump over them—and there are no artificial barriers to take you out of the moment. If it's humanly possible, Leon can do it; windows can be broken and dove in and out of, barriers can be blown out of the way, ladders climbed in real time and water waded through. The sense of real fear and panic in the game's first village is merely a sip from the bucket of horrors that awaits you. I won't say how it finally subsides, but save it to say, Resident Evil is a long way from home. The following hours, carefully moving through the game's first two chapters, were such personal moments of euphoric desolation that I think I'll just leave it at that. If you don't have a GameCube, buy one. **Dave Halverson**

> "If he catches you, he saws off your head in about a second, so…run."

When did real-time gameplay start looking like CG? Right here.

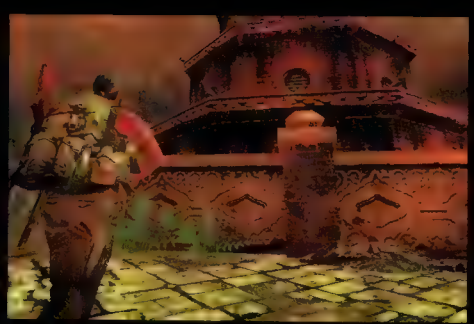


System: GameCube
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: January

Cut off behind enemy lines with no way to contact help, four young, barely trained soldiers realize their only hope for survival is to head into the heart of darkness. With few rations and dwindling ammunition, the only thing separating them from freedom is 100 miles of ruthless terrain, crawling with unseen enemies and filled with hidden booby traps. Welcome to Vietnam.

CONFLICT VIETNAM™

Get behind the wheel of Jeeps, tanks, helicopters, and river boats.



14 enormous missions in jungles, villages, temples, and underground tunnels.

Use experience points after missions to develop characters in 9 categories.

PlayStation.2 XBOX PIVOTAL GAMES SCi GAMES PC CD-ROM SOFTWARE GS GLOBAL STAR SOFTWARE

MATURE 17+ M CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood and Gore
Intense Violence
Strong Language
Suggestive Themes
Use of Drugs

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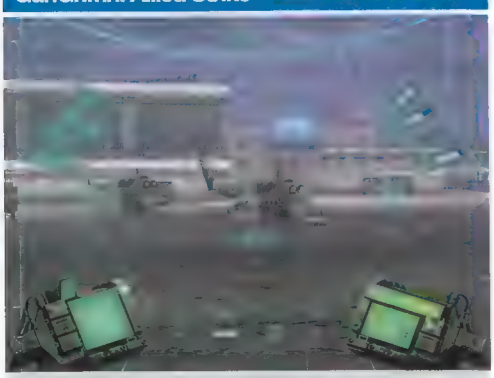
Tenchu: Fatal Shadows

Some hands-on with Sega's new Tenchu: FS—from Wrath of Heaven developer K2—has revealed a markedly improved game, and Wrath was no sour sake. The pre-Rikimaru timeline divides its time between Ayame (arigato, K2) and newcomer Rin after the two come face-to-face in an unfortunate incident that colors them adversaries. Aside from beautiful new models and better details all around, the ninjitsu is more fully featured than ever, and you can now hide bodies and even breathe underwater. Better yet, confrontation no longer spells certain death, with levels more conducive to either melee or stealth technique—a better mouse trap for a much wiser cat. **DH**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: K2
Publisher: Sega
Available: February 2005

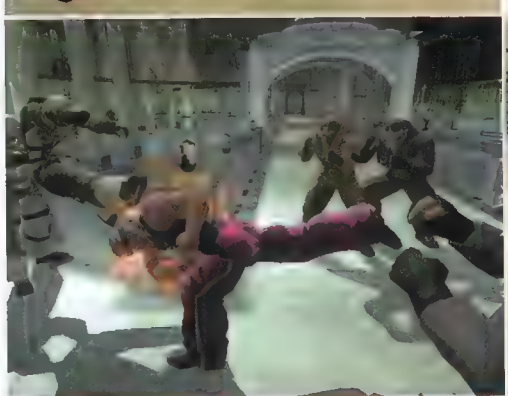
GunGriffin: Allied Strike



Game Arts (Lunar, Grandia, Silpheed) is known for meticulous detail and never shipping a game before its time. That said, they haven't enjoyed the kind of success they did in the '90s with any of their post-Sega CD, PS or DC titles. The last GunGriffon, for PS2, fell flat, Silpheed: The Lost Planet was amazing but underperformed, and Grandia Extreme, well, let's try and forget that one. Enter Tecmo—also known for steely perfection—and an all-new GunGriffon for Xbox. Could this be the mech battler that puts Game Arts back on the map? We'll soon find out. **Dave Halverson**

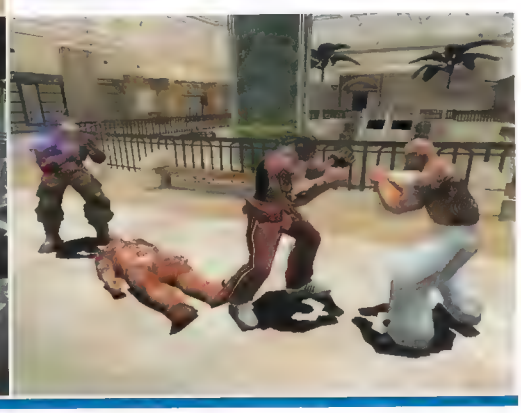
System: Xbox
Developer: Game Arts/KAMA Digital
Publisher: Tecmo
Available: Q1 2005

Spikeout Battle Street



If you don't remember the original Spikeout, don't worry—the four-player 3D arcade brawler, published in 1997, was never released in the U.S. But if you're into co-op beat-'em-up action, you won't want to miss this sequel, which continues very much in the tradition of the original; the main differences are that Spikeout Battle Street is online and it looks a whole lot better. Twelve characters will be selectable (with additional ones likely to be available for download), and each will be customizable (tattoos, clothes, hair) so each gang member will have his or her own distinct look. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Xbox
Developer: Amusement Vision
Publisher: Sega
Available: Winter

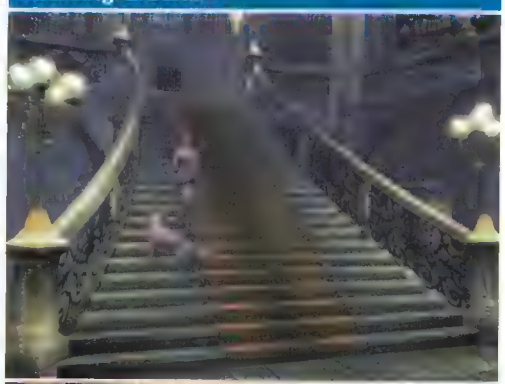


Dead to Rights II

Dead to Rights II takes players back into the crime-infested Grant City, but in this prequel, protagonist Jack Slate is still a member of the police force, where he uses his famous slow-mo shooting-spree dives and 13 new disarm animations to obliterate bad guys from the correct side of the law. Also returning is Jack's canine buddy, Shadow, which Namco promises will be better integrated into the game. Another aspect Namco is working to improve is the artwork, which they've outsourced to Widescreen Games so they can concentrate on the gameplay. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco/Widescreen Games
Available: April 2005

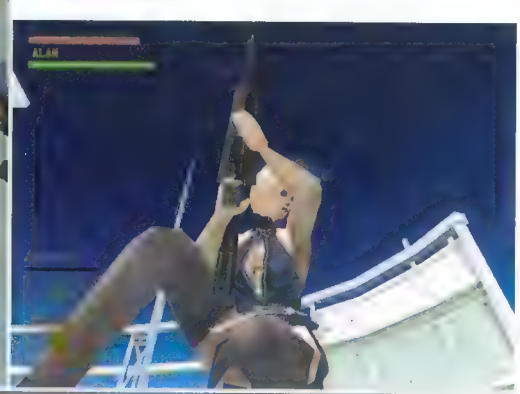
Haunting Ground



Unveiled at the recent Tokyo Game Show under its Japanese name of Demento, Haunting Ground is Capcom's latest journey into the world of survival horror. Players are cast in the role of Fiona Belli, an 18-year-old woman who finds herself trapped in a mysterious castle. Also trapped is a German shepherd named Hewie, who becomes Fiona's companion and a vital part of the game, as he can use his canine abilities to accomplish tasks and go places that Fiona cannot. They'll work together to solve puzzles, avoid enemies and escape the castle—and the monstrous man named Debilitas who stalks them. **CH**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: Summer 2005

Death by Degrees



We admit it: when we first saw Death by Degrees at E3, we were pretty disappointed. But now that the game's getting closer to release, things are looking more promising; these new screens of the beautiful Irish assassin in action certainly have us impressed. Utilizing her bone-crunching arsenal of moves honed in the Tekken series, Nina can beat opponents senseless in 360-degree combat using the right analog stick, or choose from numerous weapons (both ranged and melee) to take out attackers. In subtler times, Nina also will employ stealth on her mission to track down a missing super-weapon. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco
Available: February 2005

Dead or Alive ULTIMATE

Bottom line: Dead or Alive goes online

"The only thing really negative I can say is that it just isn't that much different from what's come before..."

Grab a friend and it's time to rumble. Now that it's all online, no matter how stagnant you want to think Dead or Alive Ultimate is, the appeal of refining your skills—being forced to find a new reason to refine those skills more than ever—to compete online is grounds for endless addiction.

As far as the core mechanics go, the only perceptible change is a more involved, four-point reversal system to drive the showdowns. This can alter the dynamic and flow of a match, and while you may find yourself needing to focus a little too much on relying on a defensive, reactionary stance, throwing an attack back in your opponent's face is a big mark in the plus column. While we're tallying scores, throw the entire Dead or Alive Ultimate package squarely in the "highly recommended" spot. **Brady Fiechter B+**

System: Xbox
Developer: Team Ninja
Publisher: Tecmo
Available: October

technical feel. Now you're really upset, huh?

huge detractor? You decide.

The game is a gorgeous display in motion.

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MATURE 17+

M

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Violence
Strong Language

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PlayStation.2

LIVE IN YOUR WORLD
PLAY IN OURS

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Baten Kaitos

Eternal Wings and the Lost Ocean

These wings only occasionally leave familiar ground

Baten Kaitos follows the recipe almost to the letter for a hit RPG. Angry male hero with a dark and mysterious past? Check. Gorgeous prerendered backgrounds? Check. An excellent musical score? Check. Nifty side quests and minigames? Check. Wakka from Final Fantasy X? OK, so it's actually his clone, but the point is that the developers mixed a lot of tried and true with only a few things new in Baten Kaitos. Although BK is a decent RPG, it would have been better if someone had noticed that their recipe is a few years old and a few of the ingredients are stale.

Even though much of Baten Kaitos feels like a PS1 Final Fantasy game, one area where it does really shine is the combat. Although the phrase "card-based battle system" might scare off some players, it really doesn't do the game justice. Drawing cards for all offensive and defensive maneuvers, stringing attacks together, blocking the enemy blow for blow, all while strategizing about elemental properties, numerical bonuses and chain attacks adds up to a remarkably flexible, innovative and fast-paced system of real-time interaction; discovering a new combo that unleashes a powerful new card in the heat of battle is awesome. Sure, it's annoying when the random elements aren't in your favor, but it doesn't ruin the experience. Carrying objects around within Magnus cards is another great feature, and it's extremely fulfilling to solve these usually optional puzzles.

If only as much innovation had gone into the other elements. The story isn't bad, but it feels like ground we've traversed so many times, and the characters lack appeal, in not only their designs and personalities but also how they stand and animate. The old-school prerendered backgrounds, however, I don't mind at all. They stand in stark contrast to the immersive 3D worlds of most modern RPGs, but the intricate details are just beautiful; the rainbow realm of Anuenue, where flowers bloom and waterfalls pour down, makes me wish more RPGs looked like this. The musical score is also excellent, but something horrible happened when it came to the voiceovers. The voice acting is slow and tinny, suffering from a weird echo effect, and frequently it's just plain bad to boot. Did Namco spend their entire VO budget on Tales of Symphonia or something? It's also very odd how there's an awkward blank every time your character's chosen name should be spoken. Why not just say something generic?

Baten Kaitos feels very much like it's striving to be Final Fantasy, but it ends up coming off more like Legend of Dragoon—another game with an FF aesthetic, an innovative battle system and, coincidentally, winged characters, but was in many eyes underwhelming. Baten Kaitos isn't bad, but it doesn't stack up to the games it seemingly wants to emulate. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: GameCube
Developer: tri-Crescendo/Monolith
Publisher: Namco
Available: November

"Baten Kaitos feels very much like it's striving to be Final Fantasy, but it ends up coming off more like Legend of Dragoon..."

Combat may be depicted by cards, but it amounts to fast-paced selections of weapons and armor.

He saw it all. With Gretzky™ NHL® 2005, you can too. See yourself as The Great One, from four different teams. See yourself break his records with Gretzky Challenge. See yourself play others online or in Rivalry Mode. And with EyeToy's™ USB camera, you can even see yourself as yourself.

EVERYONE
E
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Violence

989 SPORTS

PlayStation.2

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KILLZONE

You did disregard that "Halo killer" nonsense, right?

"If you really need a good online first-person shooter for PS2, Killzone isn't that fix."

Killzone opens big and loud, just as you'd expect from Sony's attempt to bring epic first-person action to the needy PS2. Troops are screaming, bullets are whizzing overhead, mortar blasts add to the craters in the trenches. Heavily armored super-soldiers flank your position, their glowing red eyes piercing the smoky blanket of chaos.

Good stuff, yet nothing overly exciting or impactful. The more you plow through Killzone's decently designed sci-fi locales that subtly recall a piece of our own history, the more you start to lose interest in its plodding firefights. The game forces you to take a much more realistic approach to combat, hunkering down and slowly, methodically picking away at the enemy, known as the Helghast. These relentless invaders take an inordinate amount of firepower to bring down, making the precision of a head shot a very good skill to hone.

Whether head shot or grenade to the feet or shotgun blast at point-blank, aiming your weapon never feels efficiently precise. No matter how good I got at steadying my sight, there was always an awkward awareness that held the finer points of the game at a distance. Compounding the problem and miring the fine idea of fastidiously drawn-out firefights is the laborious character movement, which made me one too many times think I had accidentally tapped the crouch button. Forget about dynamic help from your comrades, who are annoyingly inept and look clueless and off-putting as they scurry around, get in the way, draw attention when that's the last thing you want, and cry out in an endless audio-loop of pain almost as abrasive as the enemies' interminable yells.

The Helghast, in need of a wardrobe change for variety, will at one time exhibit interesting tactics, other times complete stupidity. For the most part, they're engaging enough in their staunch offensives, but there's not enough satisfying punch in their destruction, and the weapons don't feel menacing and powerful. Part of that comes down to lackluster animation and the exceptional amount of shots it takes for termination.

The indoor areas look good, showing off some impressive touches. Venture outside and, despite strong detail and architectural design, the overextended engine collapses quite jarringly at times. Because of the immense layer of haze hanging over many of the settings, it can be tough to pick things out of the rubble, and the intrusive smog just looks bad; I wanted to take cleaning solution and wipe the screen. While I was at it, I also wanted to sanitize the cutscenes, where everyone yells at each other and says "f*ck" a lot, because now you get to say "f*ck" in video games.

If you really need a good online first-person shooter for PS2, Killzone isn't that fix. It's serviceable and typical, bleeding from some of the same scrapes that wear down the campaign. Be patient: GoldenEye and Area 51 are close behind. **Brady Fiechter C**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Guerilla Games
Publisher: Sony
Available: November

The Helghast look cool in stills, but their movements look pretty bad.

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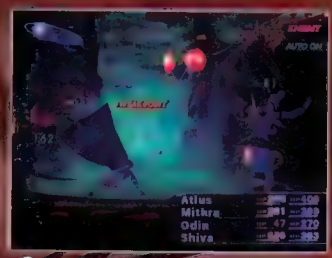

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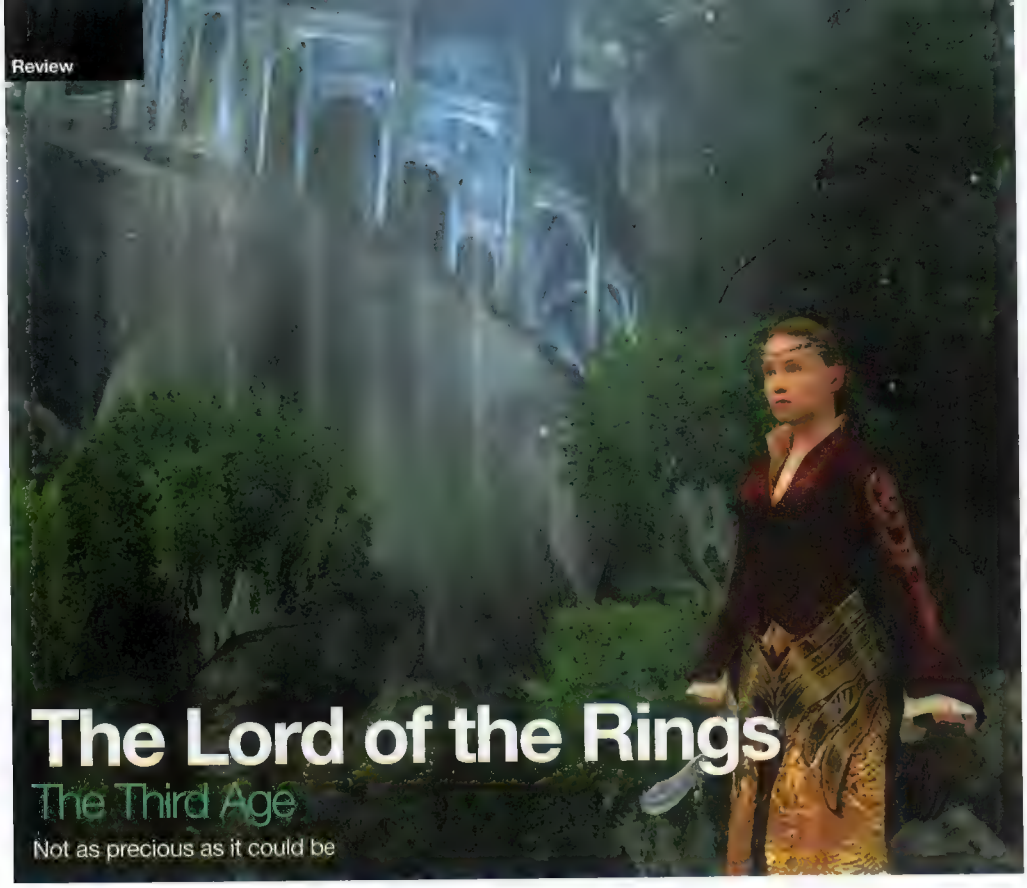

The Lord of the Rings

The Third Age

Not as precious as it could be

Is there any question that The Lord of the Rings is ideal source material for an RPG? With its epic story, human (or non-human) drama, amazing worlds and fantastic characters, there's ample room to argue that Tolkien's literary works are the foundation upon which all RPGs are based. Too bad many of those elements didn't make it into The Lord of the Rings: The Third Age. What it has instead are sky-high production values and a world straight from the film, but those alone do not a great RPG make.

At first, I was thrilled by my journey into Middle-Earth. The familiar movie environments are beautifully rendered and immediately pulled me in, boasting photo-realistic backdrops and breathtaking vistas. There's simply no way to not get excited by the rousing musical score, and voice acting just doesn't get any better than Sir Ian McKellen. Sure, it would have been better if I was actually playing as the Fellowship instead of controlling pale imitations of Aragorn, Faramir, Gimli and company, but the atmosphere and rich backstory were so intoxicating, I felt as though it wouldn't matter.

But the more I played, the more questions arose. Why are there no interactive NPCs in the first half of the game? Why are these out-of-place (but admittedly cool) re-edited movie clips interrupting the game flow? How come, instead of getting an actual narrative, objectives just pop up on my quest log that seem totally arbitrary? Why can't I visit places begging to be explored like Lothlorien and Edoras? Why are the menus so clunky? Could they really not come up with a better story than what amounts to following the members of the Fellowship? I soon stopped feeling like I was playing the movies, but rather was playing someone playing the movies.

EA managed to recreate the battle system of a traditional Japanese RPG rather well (though there's too much emphasis on special attacks and the hit-miss ratio is a bit off), but when it comes to the narrative, this is no Final Fantasy. Case in point: at the beginning of the game, your main objective is to find Boromir. Many hours and several areas later, you discover that he's dead, but you don't learn this by witnessing it; you don't learn this by encountering his body. You learn it because Gandalf says so in another out-of-place movie clip, without any drama whatsoever. That's just poor storytelling.

The Third Age does have its good points: exploring the environments is fun, the combat system is solid, and it's aesthetically spectacular—there just isn't enough holding it all together. This game is better suited for those who want to play an impressive companion piece to the movies rather than play a compelling RPG. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Electronic Arts
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: November

Spell effects add to The Third Age's visual flourish.

"How come, instead of getting an actual narrative, objectives just pop up on my quest log...?"

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MATURE 17+

M

CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

Blood
Violence
Strong Language

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PlayStation.2

LIVE IN YOUR WORLD
PLAY IN OURS

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CAPCOM FIGHTING EVOLUTION

Not really evolutionary, just a lot of fun

Capcom Fighting Evolution is everything I've ever loved about 2D fighting games. Other than the two-character teams and fact that the characters are drawn from five different Capcom fighting series—Street Fighter II, Street Fighter III, Street Fighter Alpha, Darkstalkers and Red Earth—there's nothing gimmicky here, nothing especially flashy, no overly complex systems weighing down the gameplay…just pure, super-precise, classically styled fighting.

Almost every aspect of Evolution is an absolute blast. Getting reacquainted with favorite characters like Demitri and Alex is a joy; learning to use ones I'm not familiar with (mostly those from Red Earth) is a pleasure. The fact that each character retains the game mechanics from his/her respective title is a nice touch; put your parry skills to the test by choosing SF3's Chun-Li, or maybe get a bit crazy with the chain combos and EX moves of Anakaris. A few changes have been made—SF3 characters have access to all their Supers, for example—but it's all in the name of game balance. The resulting chaos of conflicting styles is intense.

It also goes without saying that the intuitive control is perfectly honed, and the collision is spot on. This is especially noticeable with the Darkstalkers characters. I've always loved the Darkstalkers series, but I always felt the collision was just a bit squishy; that's been corrected now, making the night warriors that much more fun to control. Master your chosen characters and defeat the bosses, and you'll be rewarded with individualized endings—something that's missing from too many fighting games these days.

These gorgeous comic book-style endings by UDON (creators of the Street Fighter and Darkstalkers comics) are a tad short, but they fill the void nicely. Zangief's ending is one of the best I've seen in a fighting game in years.

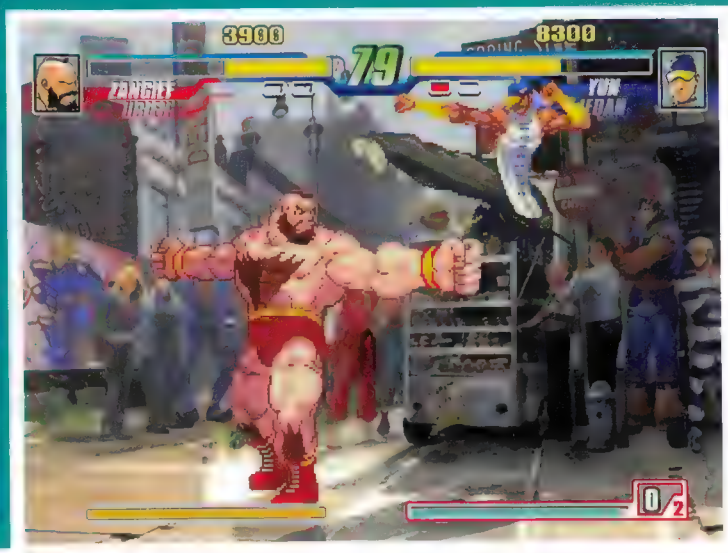
As much as I enjoy this game—I foresee myself battling against friends for months to come—I can still think of numerous ways to make it even better for the sequel. First and foremost, the character sprites need to make the jump to hi-res. The backgrounds are sweet, but the characters just look pixelated, especially on larger TVs, and there's simply no excuse for that. Then there are those characters that got overlooked; hopefully we'll get Cammy and Morrigan next time. And a few more modes would have been nice as well; one-on-one fights, team elimination matches and a mission mode would make this game shine even brighter.

Anyone who enjoys 2D fighting games owes it to themselves to check this game out. Those who've moved on or been weaned on 3D might not know what the fuss is about, and anyone expecting a wealth of options might be let down, but for 2D fighting bliss, look no further than Capcom Fighting Evolution. **Chris Hoffman** **A-**

"Anyone who enjoys 2D fighting games owes it to themselves to check this game out."

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Capcom
Available: November

Many famous Capcom characters aren't playable but are watching in the background.



Prince of Persia
Warrior Within

Ubisoft's Montreal studio [illegible]

Whatever the reasons for dramatically altering the face of the magnificent Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time, this shadowy departure into stylized gloom is a compelling fit for the newly grizzled Prince. Prince of Persia: Warrior Within is a deeper, more complex journey, unfolding through shifts in time on the search for the Empress of the Island of Time.

Combat in Warrior Within is quite different in feel from what we're used to in combo-based action-adventure. Finding a smooth stride with the more methodical, pre-programmed string of attacks takes some adjusting, but once you start violently slicing through the enemy—the disintegration of flesh and body is a delicious effect—the acrobatic, dual-weapon attacks become incredibly satisfying. The Prince, quipping in combat as to his obvious mastery of the blade, comes across an enormous range of weapons, each serving a distinct use and growing in impact. Also robust is exactly how you use your stash, with a moves set enhanced over Sands of Time, and enemies far more formidable and visually captivating. Engaging boss battles are also in the mix—locking blades is a nice touch—recalling a grand spirit of classic gaming encounters.

There's no denying the skill and engagement of combat, visualized with stylistic sensibilities like slow motion, close-ups and camera flare. But the real triumph of Prince of Persia: Warrior Within, for me, is the tremendously intricate passage through the architecturally complex castle. Instead of running through rooms and occasionally climbing over an obstacle, here you tip-toe, jump, swing, walk and crawl through a maze of rafters, walkways, tapestries, deadly traps and pretty much everything you see when you walk into the cavernous room. Reaching a far-off exit point can sometimes take several minutes of careful interaction; the room itself is a puzzle.

This immersing connection to the Prince's surroundings is drawn that much deeper by the astonishing atmosphere and amazing strokes of detail. The artists take firm hold of the gritty fantasy, running wild with moody light and a sense of the mystical, and the cutscenes are gorgeous. I could do without the pointlessly misplaced sexuality of the female characters, but at least they're a minor distraction. As anticipated sequels go, Prince of Persia: Warrior Within is absolutely everything it should be. It's an amazingly involving adventure from spirit to atmosphere to richness of setting and exploration. **Brady Fiechter**

System: PS2, GC, Xbox
Developer: Ubisoft Montreal
Publisher: Ubisoft
Available: November

"...the real triumph...for me, is the tremendously intricate passage through the architectural complex castle."

Ubi Montreal has given him the tools, you supply the talent

Blinx 2

Masters of Time and Space

What was to be Microsoft's platforming critter de jour, Blinx: The Time Sweeper—lovingly handcrafted by one of the true masters, Naoto Ohshima—was met with mixed reviews. While most agreed it was a beautiful game with an innovative hook, many considered its VCR-based time controls overly complex in execution and unforgiving, resulting in too many gameplay conundrums and subsequent do-overs. Having always been of the mindset that the best games require mastery of certain elements, and that do-overs are a good thing if the universe supports it, I found tuning in to Ohshima's fastidious frequency eminently rewarding and absolutely loved it; but I was in the minority. With the sequel, he has tried to appease both sides of the equation, and has done exactly that.

Blinx 2 is an entirely different game…a more fleshed out, almost action-RPG-like adventure that while clearly overly hint laden (you can't get lost or not know what to do; the "operator" is always there to walk you through) is now a grand hub-based opus, Artoon having fine-tuned their creation to near-perfection. Gameplay is divided between two factions: the Tom Tom gang's stealthy pirate pigs and the Time Sweepers' time-manipulating cats, after the two are sent on a collision course trying to reassemble the Big Crystal that keeps the time-space continuum in check. The cats want the Crystal back to avoid the collapse of the universe, while the Pig Boss Benito wants it to appease the girl of his dreams (literally), Mina, who pops into his tiny sleeping brain and beckons him to bring it to her…so, you can see where that's going. A tug of war ensues divided between Time Sweeper stages—using Sweepers and time controls in a simplified manner (the AI makes sure you always have the correct color crystals for the job, negating any confusion) amidst brilliantly concocted level design—and Tom Tom stages, employing stealth-like tactics, space controls, shooting and looting—two entirely different types of gameplay, both fantastic in their own right, that culminate by either epic boss battle or team warfare. The game is also, as you can see, insanely beautiful, shellacked with glossy effects, and perfectly polished in terms of both control and physics.

Deployment comes by way of each team's base of operations, where you'll find a locker room, for changing gear and equipping newly purchased arms and items, and shops, integral to the game, where you control every facet of your team's assault. Before entering each warp, it is required that you take Rank Exams—essentially training

When there's trouble with time, Artoon's Time Sweepers heed the call...

levels meant to familiarize players with the latest time controls and play mechanics for the challenge ahead…like I said, nothing has been left to chance. Blinx 2 also has one of the most comprehensive character creators ever—allowing you to change and evolve your pigs and cats as you deem throughout—and supplying you the tools to make doing so highly rewarding. Elsewhere, new tricks include everything from pole climbing to rope sucking to tank warfare and, as with the first game, the music matches the mischievous facade of the game perfectly. Every facet of Blinx 2 shines with that wonderful Ohshima flair that began with Sonic the Hedgehog and has resonated through everything Artoon has created since. This is just masterful game making, pure and simple. **A-** **Dave Halverson**

System: Xbox
Developer: Artoon
Publisher: Microsoft Game Studios
Available: November

Ratchet & Clank

Up Your Arsenal

The best in what has become one of modern gaming's most accomplished series

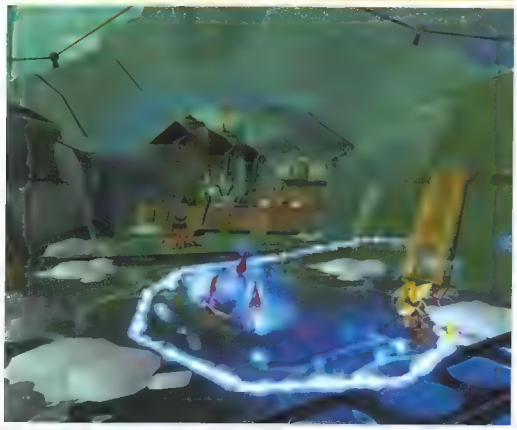
Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal is Insomniac's best game—better than last year's phenomenal Going Commando, far better than most everything I've played this year, certainly one of the most refined, sophisticated, dynamically crafted games on modern hardware. When you break down its many diverse virtues, Up Your Arsenal really comes down to one thing: terrific entertainment.

It's entertaining in so many ways because of so many varying, unexpected pieces that build the Up Your Arsenal foundation. You've got nostalgic, well-designed 2D bits bookended by hilarious, gorgeously drawn comic book panels. You've got gladiator stretches of intense gauntlet-style platforming, where cameras track you as a live audience looks on. You've got virtual movie sets to demolish, ships to fly, buggies to battle in, turrets to command, inventively integrated puzzles. And what a blast it is to redirect laser fields around a massive spherical grid and strap on magnetic boots to walk through a disorienting grid of constantly shifting 3D tubes!

All this and tons more, skillfully nestled in the immense interplanetary construct without coming off like a patchwork of ideas, and all so masterfully presented and designed. While the game isn't as long as you might think—13 hours delivered me to the end—the efficiency and pacing is spot on, packing an enormously dense punch while wisely avoiding the dead stretches that have been weighing down a lot of games lately.

Remove all the multidimensional support that elevates Up Your Arsenal to that special level and the game would still remain a spectacular action experience. The gameplay core consists of tactical shooting of the highest order, forcing you to rely on the many widely distinct weapons in your arsenal—often cycling through a handful in a single battle—to bust through the challenging, meticulously structured battles with the array of colorful enemies. Mixing in the basic experience system sparks additional charge, adding immense satisfaction to weapons and character upgrades. While there is indeed a bit of a run-and-gun first-person shooter feeling here, what makes the shootouts so wildly engaging is the eventual need to rely on such a broad range of weapons for specific situations, setting up flanks, taking out defined waves of offense. One thing that really struck

The plasma whip works its magic.



me as remarkably cool—and I can't really point to any game out there with quite the same sensation—were the setups that resembled a sort of 2D space-shooter pattern redefined in 3D space. Instead of charging in or demonstrating aggressive patterns, groups of enemies would unleash a flurry of bullets from clever cross points, creating a web of chaos Ratchet must navigate.

When the game pauses for its characters to talk about their troubles and listen to fumbling world-party-pooper Dr. Nefarious once again plot destruction, the animations are so lively and of such high quality that they begin to take on a real presence. Presentation, from the spot-on voice—Captain Quark is a riot—to the knowing direction to the editing, exists, yet again, on a different level—a standard every game should follow, yet few seem to even flirt with.

Instead of pushing much story through, Insomniac decided to enliven their characters with wry, snappy dialogue and a pervasive sense of situational humor. I've never laughed this much in a game, and there are a few times where I had to smile at the clever skewering of modern culture. Insomniac ultimately keeps things light and safe, veering into goofiness and overextending the humor, but it says a lot about the character and charm of their entire creation that the banter in the game resonates so effectively.

If there is one pervasive soft spot in Up Your Arsenal's game plan, it's the familiar playing field. Despite its universal superiority, there's not that much of a defined separation from the look and feel of Going Commando, and quite honestly, as satisfying as all the collecting can be, the game structure has become too encompassing for this antiquated technique to feel like it belongs. The newness is gone—another sequel would be disappointing—and yet the game is so good at what it does, the occasional bumps are like a few raindrops on a perfect day at the beach.

When I named Going Commando my second favorite game last year, a colleague asked how I could enjoy something that looked so much like a cartoon for younger kids (there's a sly note hit in the Up Your Arsenal subtitle to speak on this one). No, this wouldn't be my first choice to see these ideas in motion, and I think Insomniac could dig so much deeper thematically, but that's not their choice. There's an exuberance and love for the craft that bubbles through Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal. And in a time when games are embracing facile, tasteless, empty themes and humorless realities, Up Your Arsenal and its playful, enthusiastic, even gentle sensibilities emerge as what can be so right existing on the opposite side of the equation.

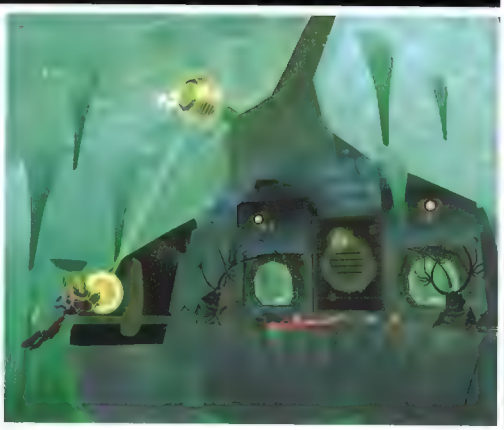
Brady Fiechter A

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Insomniac Games
Publisher: Sony
Available: November

"You've got virtual movie sets to demolish, ships to fly, buggies to battle in, turrets to command, inventively integrated puzzles."

ONLINE

Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal is the first time Insomniac has dabbled in the online arena, and this is first time a game of its kind has gone there as well. As is the case way too often with pre-release software, it was difficult to find a full range of players and dive into long enough stretches of play to truly discover what subtleties this component has to offer. My initial impression is that you'll be thoroughly enjoying the several game modes, even if they didn't feel far removed from everything else we're getting in online's current infancy. Given the quality of the single-player game, there was bound to be a competent structure here, but...well, you decide just how good it is after you've had your fill with the single-player adventure.

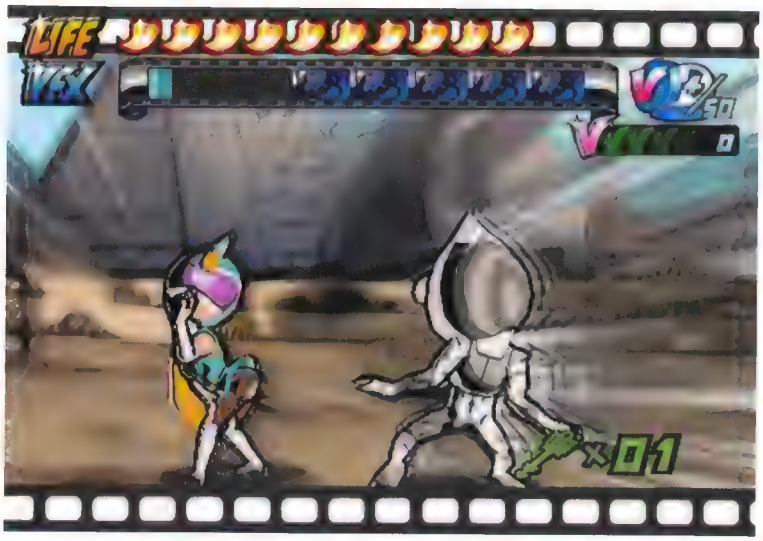


Viewtiful Joe 2

And the Oscars go to...

To look at Viewtiful Joe as just another action game franchise would be to miss the bigger picture. From its satirical narration to its neo-surfer cool attitude, Viewtiful Joe is this century's arcade cool—an action universe so dripping with originality that it exists beyond the user/interface relationship, drawing you into its absurd alter-reality with such audacious verve that it makes you feel as cool as what's transpiring on screen, which is super F-ing cool.

So what's a team to do after reinvigorating 2D with cel-shaded 3D characters on layered facades through manic movie manipulation? Easy! Pull the whole shootin' match into the silver screen, fleshing out the universe for the upcoming 52-episode TV series, and throw down a parade of puzzles in concert with even better action than before, that's what! While the squeamish will be happy to learn that the new VJ is a tad easier than the last, especially where the bosses are concerned (VJ was too hard given the premise), those intellectually challenged gamers who spend their days drooling on their Trapper Keepers may want to consider an extra Double Shot before embarking on Joe and Sylvia's latest plight, in which she is now a permanent fixture. Switching between gaming's first couple on the fly, this is the thinking man's (or woman's) action game to a stifling degree. On top of Mach Speed, Slow-Mo and Zoom, Sylvia brings Replay to the festivities, which works in conjunction with other moves and environmental factors to produce solutions to a series of increasingly complex action puzzles. Only Sylvia can Replay, while Joe alone can produce the fire of Mach Speed. Used properly, they're one sweet action duo, not to mention snappy dressers. The bosses bring it too, but this time around they're more fun to



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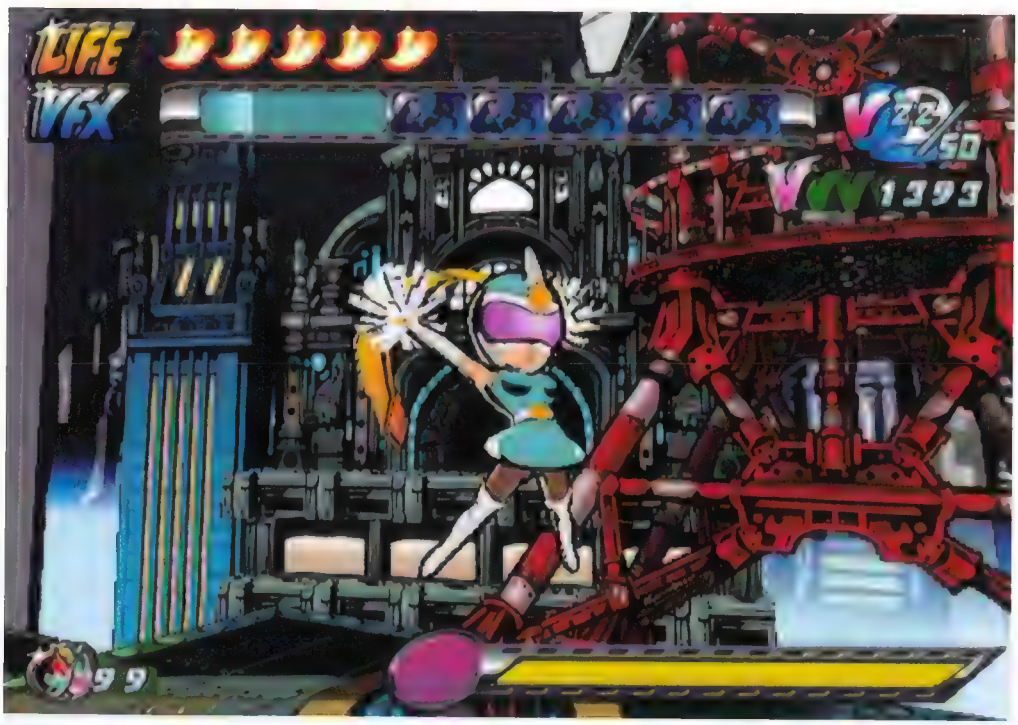
reach than they are to hear and, of course, send crashing to the cutting room floor.

If you feel the incessant need to juggle and master the art of complex combos, VJ2 is your white knight, with 2D melee action on par with the king of the kind, Treasure's Mischief Makers. Like the first game but even more so, you can slip by many a gaggle of freaks by slow motion alone, but to truly rack up a viewtiful score (and a hefty chunk of change), the 9999 pt. combo is the ticket—enough for Sylvia's Level 3 Desperado (that's twin pistols with up to eight lock-ons), Joe's Level 3 Mach Speed (putting up to eight Joes on screen at once) and a down payment on the pair's Viewtiful/Sexy Forever—the game's coolest new move in which Joe and Sylvia pose enemies to death by dodging in slow-mo and zooming in. Among the myriad of reasons why I loved this game more every second I played it (and that's a lot of seconds; it's about twice as long) is the way the puzzles and especially the visual presentation evolve. In the original, the graphics packed a powerful initial punch and then remained consistent for the duration (which was more than fine given how innovative they were), but in VJ2, the sets evolve on par with the gameplay. About the time you find yourself wishing they'd turned it up a notch, they crank the visual dial into the red zone beginning with Reel 4 (Thunder Boy Lives Again). Before our next meeting with Alastor, we're privy to some seriously inspired dioramas awash with blazing purples and greens in a dark, stormy setting leading to one of the game's best bits: a shifting bank of rooms tethered to a clever portrait puzzle. Not so soon after, traversing the snow, sea (where the Six Machine becomes submarine and drill) and finally outer space, Clover seals the deal, leading us to the inevitable conclusion that Viewtiful Joe 2 is as patently significant as Viewtiful Joe was, successfully improving on what was already a 2D tour de force: Viewtiful Joe 2 is to Viewtiful Joe as *Kill Bill Volume 2* was to *Kill Bill*…proof you can improve on perfection. **Dave Halverson A**

System: PlayStation 2, GameCube
Developer: Clover Studio
Publisher: Capcom
Available: November

Diorama, cheerleading outfit... big-ass cannon...action!!



"Among the myriad of reasons why I loved this game more every second I played it...is the way the puzzles and especially the visual presentation evolve."

Jak 3

[illegible]

The original Jak and Daxter: The Precursor Legacy, Naughty Dog's shining opus for the PS2, was Earth-shatteringly original (by gaming standards). Its world was our oyster: one big, seamless universe where events transpired on the fly. But there was a glitch (or two) in the matrix. Just weeks before its Dec '01 launch, two other juggernauts dropped from the sky: GTA III and Halo: Combat Evolved. What had become one of the best fourth quarters in console gaming history was so star-studded that the innovation of the platformer went by with far less fanfare than it warranted, as GTA III emerged the clear victor. If there was to be a new era in gaming, it would be one buzzing around huge metropolises, weaving stories and missions into a vast bustling sprawl. So, in a classic case of "if you can't beat 'em, join 'em," less than two years later Naughty Dog delivered the first GTA-style platformer: Jak II. A great game by any standards, if Jak II stumbled anywhere it was in the realization that vast cities are a lot more fun to traverse when you can toy with hookers, piss off the cops or jack a sports car to use for pedestrian bowling. Enter Jak 3, the third and final chapter of this particular Jak and Daxter saga. The culmination of all they've learned along the way, Jak 3 is the modern-day world/action game incarnate, marrying real-time storytelling and a myriad of perfectly honed gameplay devices into a universe that fuses gamer with game from the outset and never lets go. Those long bouts of downtime between missions are a thing of the past; Jak 3 is a near 20-hour-long rollercoaster ride that stacks missions of perfectly manufactured driving, platforming, tactical shooting and everything in between—like the skies over LAX.

Immediately following Jak's exile by the Haven City council (something about letting in the Metal Heads) and subsequent one-way ticket to the desert wastes, we're introduced to the game's core elements at a brisk pace, cutting our teeth by battling in the arena, riding Leamers (which I could do all day), traversing the vast desert by dune buggy and, of course, dusting off the old jump button for some high-precision platforming, courtesy of Jak's rubbery animation. However, as diverse as this game is, and it's the poster child, two gameplay mechanics stand out as utterly gleaming: piloting the Dune Hopper (they could build an entire game around this called Blaster Master Jak) and later in the game what I like to refer to as Jak Raiser. If you never played ActRaiser 2 on SNES my apologies for running off course, but, if you have, when Light Jak sprouts wings and gets his glide on, you might just shed a tear of joy. Whoever's idea it was to infuse these proceedings with shades of Blaster Master and ActRaiser. I am forever in their debt.

Elsewhere, once again, the story—a dire end-of-the-world-as-we-know-it chronicle—unfolds in brilliant cutscenes depicted through painstakingly fresh, never recycled animations. But Naughty Dog is well aware that the name of the game is action, and so they've painted it into every inch of the world formula. We're handed evolving weapons of mass destruction (to say they've whipped out the big guns would be an understatement), various means

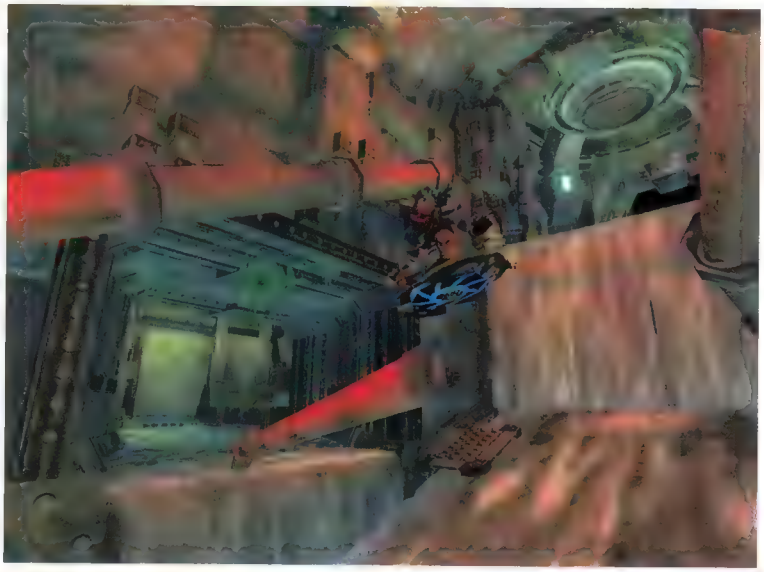
"...a near 20-hour-long rollercoaster ride that stacks missions of perfectly manufactured driving, platforming, tactical shooting and everything in between..."

of transportation and turned loose in a grand work of fiction—next-gen action and adventure at its very finest. Plowing through waste-high mud in the Gila Stomper, watching plumes of dust blow off of the cracked edges of the surface, or coming up over a bluff during a dune buggy mission to see the rising sun cast its shadow slowly over the desert...these are the moments that epitomize the art of gaming. The detail in Jak 3, down to the tire marks left in the sand (even when you're backing up slowly or crossing over fresh treads), is the best I've seen on PS2, or perhaps anywhere. The look of the decaying city and the way it segues into the heavily fortified high-rent district coupled with the game's vast underground labyrinths and breathtaking desert vistas, are moments I will never forget—indelible memories from arguably the greatest action trilogy ever created.

When all is said and done versus the equally majestic Ratchet & Clank saga (my two comrades' epic of choice), if it all boils down to the best ending, I think I might have them beat. Between a pair of plot twists to beat all plot twists and the coolest last boss imaginable, Jak 3's is the best action-game ending maybe ever, and the journey through the wastes just before the cataclysmic event simply defies description. Naughty Dog makes destruction look beautiful like nothing I've ever seen. I can't imagine action games getting any better...lucky for me, I'll bet they can. **Dave Halverson**

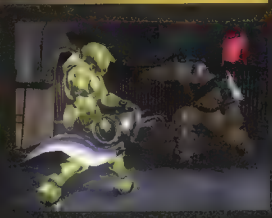
System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Naughty Dog
Publisher: Sony
Available: November

All this and Daxter gets the girl? Oh yeah, and a whole lot more...



Halo 2

Raising the bar for first-person shooters yet again



Halo 2 is not the greatest game ever made. I repeat: Halo 2 is not the greatest game ever made.

Goodbye hype, hello Halo 2. If you don't experience it for yourself, you're missing out on the most epic, most highly produced, most strategically grounded first-person shooter on console—a ceaselessly kinetic sci-fi march through a virtual battleground so grand and complexly laid out, it dwarfs everything before it. Just as the original Halo dazzled and inspired, there will certainly be successors learning and modeling off this sequel's undeniably vast and unprecedented achievements. And the finest of these successors will inevitably hit with more developed form. But that will be then, and this is now: it's time to buckle down once again with genetically empowered marine Master Chief and blast through one of the best games of the year.

My experience with this extraordinarily ambitious first-person shooter began in a stuffy hotel conference room, surrounded by a handful of hopelessly anxious reviewers tethered to small wide-screen televisions and feeble surround-sound-simulating headphones. Not at all what I wanted for my inhabitance of Microsoft's most important game in the history of the Xbox hardware. Imagine watching *Star Wars* for the first time in an uncomfortable, low-rent theater with the lights on.

Two hurried days of marathon play—one for multiplayer, one for single-player—and it was over. I had played a thrilling, incredibly charged game, and whatever my expectations going in, the moments of sheer adrenaline rush were awesome. Maybe there's much more to Halo 2 that will take time to discover: strategic elements abound, like properly utilizing the new dual-weapon system—a plasma pistol is worthless as a single weapon, but perfect for taking down shields while your other hand unloads a round of machine gun fire. And when I went back to play on a harder difficulty—the game seems far more rewarding ramped up—I had noticed an area where I neglected to release prisoners. This time, the new help proved not only invaluable, it was just that much more fun having the visual support.

One of Halo 2's most memorable qualities is this massive ally presence. Instead of one lone soldier against ridiculous odds, your military friends create a sense of an army versus an army, building merciless paths of destruction all around. As much as the scripted war is a visual juggernaut of intensity, what ultimately really impressed me was just how smart and active your help can be, adding as much to the death toll as your own efforts. When you are off on your own, the contrasting tension is brilliant.

This sophisticated support can make for some incredible moments. Consider a situation I found myself caught in, where I got backed into a wall by two converging Hunters, fumbling to reload while my shield beeping warned of imminent failure. Just as one sentinel begins to unload, two allied soldiers cut both creatures to pieces. It all happens so fast and with such force, I can't think of a game this year where I experienced such a visceral involvement.

Moments like these are common. Part of the game's

hold is rooted in the intricate architectural design, setting up sneaky cat-and-mouse games; above all the returning weapons, I still find nothing more satisfying than efficient use of the sniper rifle. Intelligent reaction from the enemy is, of course, paramount too. Early in the game, I carefully snuck under a walkway into a little opening housing a generator. A lattice of beams exposed two sentinels patrolling intently, darting their heads back and forth as they made their rounds. Unlike in most games, the enemy wasn't artificially reactive; I was obviously hidden, and it makes no sense to be spotted, ruining my reliance on using the world for believable strategy and cover. I took a shot. The response from the enemy was sudden and jolting, and they split paths to converge on my hiding point. Incredible.

Everything's designed with a master's eye for first-person intensity, extensively crafted and technically superb, but there's a slight shadow of inelegance that sneaks up now and again, keeping the game from greatness. There are even a few stretches of play that are visually dull and a touch cold: I wasn't too fond of the blocky artificiality of the temple-like area, and some of the more open, sprawling sections are more imposing than attractive. But for every jarring crack, for every dull texture, there extends a massive wall of intrigue.

A huge part of the visual presence is the sheer population and mass of structures extending all around. Bungie has built an incredibly complex and engagingly structured world, linking the areas together for an awesome sense of space and belonging. There are some terrifically imaginative scenes, vibrating with atmosphere and grandeur. I loved moments like jumping into pods that leave the chaotic surface and wind through the murky water, and battling through a network of shafts that open into a raging storm outside created a sense of wonder.

Halo 2 is not impervious to nitpicking. It says something about the awesome scope of the game that it can succeed on such a scale while moving around a substantial amount of potholes: the recycling of areas near the very end, some tedious progression and pacing, misplaced musical tracks. The use of vehicles is a lot of fun, especially the aerial shootouts in the Banshee, but they all feel heavy-handed and don't look quite right despite the reliance on a detailed physics model; the enemy often looks goofy, careening around like bumper cars.

All this is fairly minor and sporadic. The same can't be said for the narrative—a banal sci-fi and masked-theology mishmash that continues the trend of strained video game storytelling. The game pauses for a lot of cutscenes to attempt meaning for all this merciless destruction, but really the biggest compromise to the suspension of disbelief—and I really can't think of a game that's annoyed me this much, probably because there's probably not a game with this much recorded speech—stems from the endlessly dumb character bantering: "Can we possibly make any more noise? [Noise is made] I guess so." "Come out, so we may kill you. Ha, ha, ha! [must-have maniacal laugh]." "It's merely a flesh wound!" Now that games want to be more like movies, it's too bad numbing summer action blockbusters have become their template, proclaiming you have to supply deflated, forced jokes when you're kicking ass.

Oh well. Halo 2 has its annoyances, but when it's ass that is in need of kicking, no game this year will provide the boot with this much raw force. **Brady Fiechter** A

System: Xbox
Developer: Bungie
Publisher: Microsoft
Available: November

"Everything's designed with a master's eye for first-person intensity, extensively crafted and technically superb..."

Halo 2 Online

bottom.

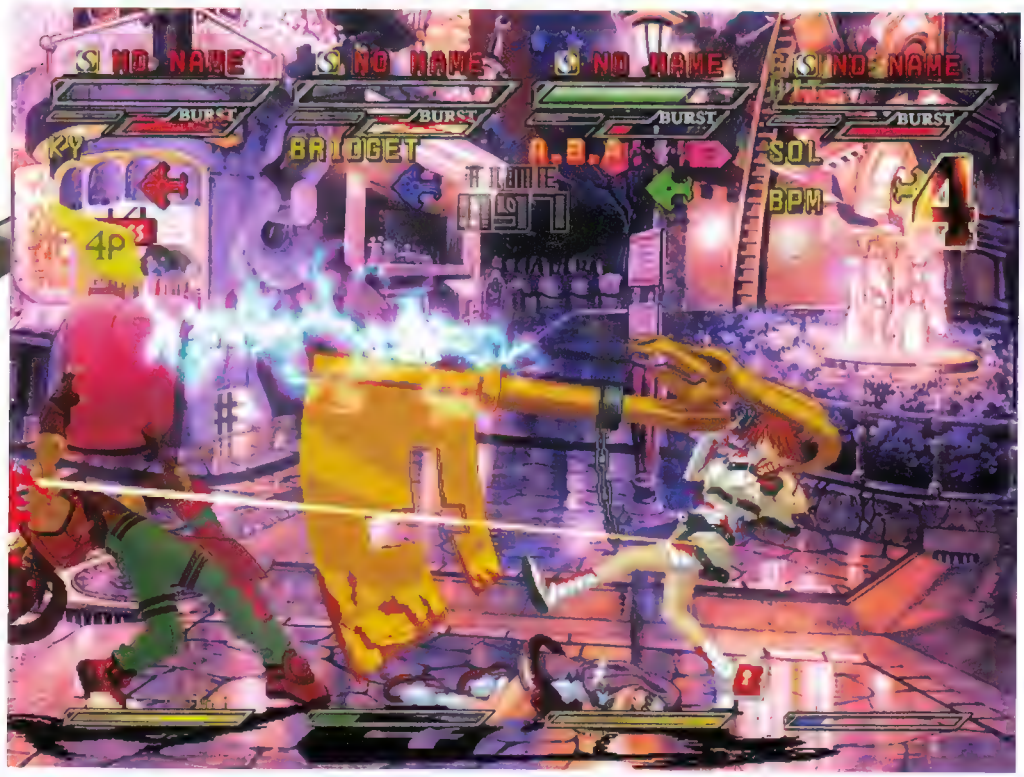
Guilty Gear ISUKA

"Isuka" must be Japanese for "insane fighting mayhem"

You thought you knew Guilty Gear. You knew about the ultra-precise fighting, the unparalleled depth in the realm of 2D combat, the nuances of tension gauges, roman cancels, negative penalties and faultless defense. Guilty Gear Isuka proves that you ain't seen nothing yet. Though Guilty Gear is as deep and technical as it ever was, it's now hidden behind a mask of madcap four-player carnage the likes of which the genre has never seen; Marvel vs. Capcom 2 has got nothing on Isuka.

Isuka can be played as a one-on-one fighting game, but it's really all about breaking out the multitap and engaging in crazed two-on-two team combat, explosive free-for-alls and all the variations in between. Two separate planes are utilized to hold all the mayhem, and a turn button has been necessarily integrated into the action so you can fight opponents on either side, even though it goes against almost every 2D fighting instinct you've ever developed. It takes a while to get used to for sure, but it's nothing to sweat over. You might feel the heat, however, when the screen explodes in an orgy of flashy special effects unlike anything you've ever witnessed, sometimes completely burying your character in the process as attacks flow from every direction (even between planes). It's here where your skills will really be put to the test, as you'll use every technical trick in the book to survive, or else degenerate into a frenzy of button-mashing delight.

If you don't feel like pounding your friends though, you can always select one of the 20-plus musically inclined characters—choose from favorites like Sol Badguy, Millia, Chipp, Faust and Dizzy, or use brand-new characters A.B.A and Robo-Ky II—and play the arcade mode cooperatively or just fly solo. The progression through arcade mode is nonsense—I can't fathom the benefit of having new opponents take the stage before I can finish wiping the floor with my current foes—but who cares? You still get to kick, punch, slash and special move everything in your way before you defeat the gargantuan final boss. Just don't go looking for the instant kills; those are gone.



The trade-off for the increased action in Isuka is a slightly lessened quality in the graphics. They still look great for certain, and the characters remain beautifully smooth, but the backgrounds just don't look as rich as in previous Guilty Gear games. The soundtrack still rocks, however.

Aside from the multiplayer mania of arcade and versus modes, Isuka has another noteworthy mode: GG Boost. Taking a cue from greats like Final Fight and Double Dragon, Boost mode transforms the Guilty Gear landscape into that of a side-scrolling beat-'em-up (complete with co-op option), where you can use all your arcade-mode moves to obliterate wave after wave of fodder characters (and smash power-ups out of barrels). It's fun for a while, but GG wasn't really built for this kind of game; levels are fairly small, there are only a few types of enemies (Robo-Ky is the boss for almost every level) and turning around has a slight lag. Still, this is one of the coolest bonus modes ever included in a fighting game.

I didn't find myself as fulfilled with Isuka as I have been with the more traditional Guilty Gear games, but for the four-player 2D action alone, GGI is great stuff. Throw in the Boost mode and other extra features (there's a Robo-Ky II customization mode too), along with the $20 value price, and Guilty Gear Isuka absolutely rocks. **Chris Hoffman B+**

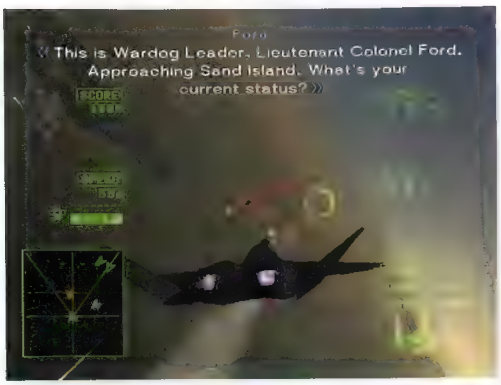
System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Arc System Works
Publisher: Sammy Studios
Available: November

"...you'll use every technical trick in the book to survive, or else degenerate into a frenzy of button-mashing delight."

Ace Combat 5

The Unsung War

One last hurrah from this seminal series



Ace Combat 5 reminded me of why I love Namco. When they're firing on all cylinders, they produce games with the attention to detail and loving craft that rivals only Nintendo in my book. This being the last entry in the series on PS2, they have decided to go out in high style indeed.

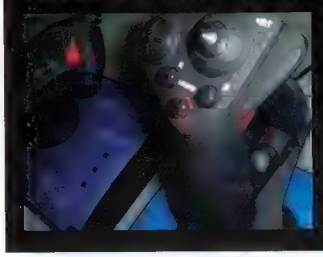
One need look no further than the intricate animations that open and describe each mission to see that this game is a cut above the rest and the product of an enthusiasm that is palpable. The people that made this were in love with what they were creating, and they have an eye for detail that truly adds to the experience. Their understanding of atmospherics, for example, lends the scenery with an uncanny sense of realism. The hazy distance, the muted colors of the ground, the subtly shimmering seas, the vapor that builds up on your wings in high-G maneuvers—all these things conspire to make you believe you are indeed in a real environment. However, they can't work miracles. Get close to the ground and it all goes a bit wrong and turns into a murky mess. Good thing the PS3 is just around the corner to cure these moments of illusion-sapping crap.

But I'm really talking about window dresssing here. What matters in the end is the quality of the experience while the controller is in your hand, and Ace Combat 5 does not disappoint. The missions themselves are about what you would expect: destroy the thing before the time runs out, or protect the thing until the time runs out. What's important here is the execution and level of player involvement, not that we haven't done all this before, because we have. And believe me, I was involved. Though the scenarios were familiar, the drama contained within them surprised me. The confluence of the perfectly executed graphics and flight model along with the chatter from wingmates and AI programmed to create engaging dogfighting created a sense of excitement that I've not felt from a flight combat game since I played the original Warhawk way back on PlayStation.

Rounding out this fine package are the best replays this side of Gran Turismo, a Japanese voice option (although in this case there's nothing at all wrong with the English voice) and the ability to play with Hori's fantastic FlightStick. I'm sold. **Michael Hobbs A-**

Hori FlightStick 2

I'm not one to go overboard for thse sorts of things, but when a flight stick comes along for console that is of this quality and married to such a fine game, I simply can't resist. Hori's FlightStick 2 adds a fantastic sense of occasion to playing Ace Combat 5 and allows for a level of control not quite possible with the humble Dual Shock 2. If you're like me, you will delight in finding switches and little analog sticks that are littered all over this thing.



System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco
Available: October

"What's important here is the execution and level of player involvement, not that we haven't done all this before, because we have. And believe me, I was involved."

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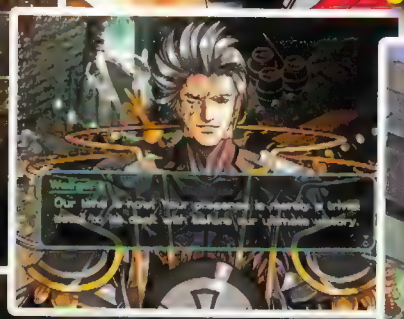

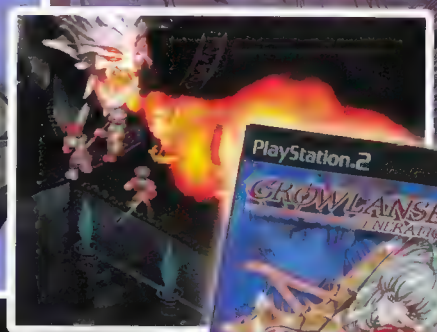

TEEN T
CONTENT RATED BY ESRB
Blood
Language
Mild Fantasy Violence

PlayStation.2

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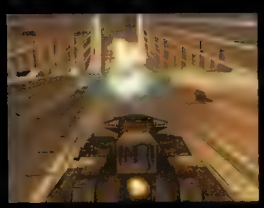
Reviews

Rating Scale

Excellent A
Very Good B
Average C
Poor D
Worthless F

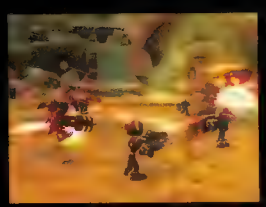
"I can't imagine action games getting any better..

Also notice...



Halo 2
p.074

Like you need to be told that Halo 2 is the best first-person shooter to hit consoles this year. Bungie delivers both online and off.

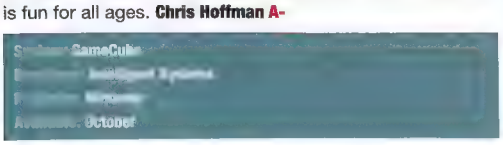


Ratchet & Clank: Up Your Arsenal
p.068

Insomniac's fantastic series culminates in a superbly presented shooter/platformer powerhouse.

Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door

In terms of sheer fun, Paper Mario: The Thousand-Year Door is the best RPG I've played in a long time. From the strategy-laden, extremely fulfilling, skill-based battle system to the stylish storybook aesthetic to the nice helping of platforming that's incorporated into the mix, The Thousand-Year Door just has a world that begs to be explored (especially using Mario's new transformative powers) and a sense of wonder that's really only comparable to its N64 predecessor. The writing is fantastic—clever, funny and self-aware—and the world interaction using Mario's partner characters gives the game ample depth. Then there are the Boswer mini-levels—Nintendo needs to give that guy his own game ASAP. Like the best Disney movies, Paper Mario is fun for all ages. **Chris Hoffman** **A-**

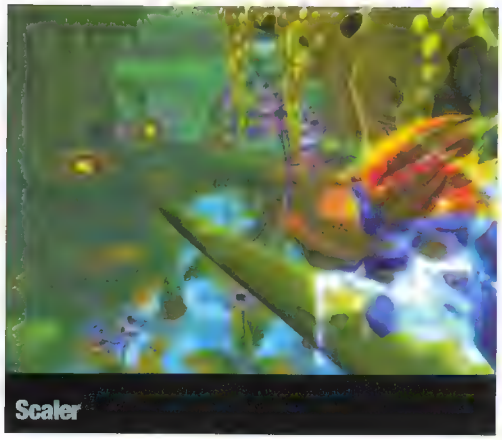


Mario's latest adventure takes him to all manner of entertaining locales, from sewers to flying cities to haunted mansions.

BloodRayne 2

While playing B2 on PS2 makes you appreciate the Xbox version all the more, by PS2 standards, TR has done a great job cramming it into the Sony shell. The most notable differences are degraded fine detail and texture quality, and the absence of the bump mapping that so lovingly painted Rayne's Xbox model. The gameplay, however, stays the course, with the animation, arterial spray, and environments all intact. In case you missed last month's Xbox review, BR2 is a more tactical adventure than the first—more nuanced, with weapons that feed and evolve, improved melee combat and, bar none, the most bloodletting ever seen in a game thanks to a series of disemboweling puzzles and psychotic blade maneuvers. **Dave Halverson B**

System: PlayStation 2 (reviewed), Xbox, PC
Developer: Terminal Reality
Publisher: Majesco
Available: October



Scaler

It's easy to see why GS kept Scaler under wraps and out of the mags' hands until it hit retail, seeing as how platformers have come under such heavy fire, but it's kind of a shame, because this is a sweet ride (especially for a value title) if you can stomach the almost blindingly psychedelic graphics and the talkiest character since Awesome Possum. If Scaler never spoke, he'd actually be okay—as his lizard guise gives him some fresh abilities like attacking with his tongue, negotiating climbing paths and rail-sliding—but he's a 12-year-old boy stuck in lizard's body in a parallel universe so, of course, he must spout such witty banter as "Who's da man!?" and "Slam dunk!" The game is beautiful though—60fps and good fun. **Dave Halverson B-**

System: Xbox
Developer: A2M
Publisher: Global Star Software
Available: October

EyeToy: AntiGrav

At last, we're getting an EyeToy game that uses its technology for something more substantial than minigames or dancing. AntiGrav is a full-blown futuristic racer, only with the caveat that you control everything—steering, jumping, ducking, stunts, aerial maneuvering—with your body. The eight courses are wide open, filled with potential secrets, multiple routes and bonus opportunities, and the experience is unlike any I've had before, but how much fun you get out of it is somewhat up to the player. Personally, steering with my head, jumping and flailing my arms to do tricks didn't do it for me, but if you think you'd get a kick out of learning to race in a whole new way, definitely check it out. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Harmonix
Publisher: Sony
Available: November

Ty the Tasmanian Tiger 2: Bush Rescue

To say Ty 2 is big would be an understatement. Krome has Super Sized it, spreading their funky animal kingdom as far and wide as the outback itself. A different animal altogether, Ty 2 is a mission-based escapade of epic proportions. Things take forever to get rolling, as you carry out way too many menial tasks that take longer to reach than to complete, but hang tight. As time wears on and you become accustomed to the game's flow, you'll find yourself immersed in one meaty game world. The two years since the debut have rendered some of Ty's mates a bit wanting in the model department, but the injections of Bunyip (assorted mechs) and new vehicles (all of which are a gas) make this an overall experience not to be missed if you like long, involved critter-based excursions. **Dave Halverson B**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube
Developer: Krome Studios
Publisher: EA
Available: October

Pretty nice reflections for PS2, eh mate?

Half-Life 2

A clinic of game design proficiency Review

Recommended system specs

OS: Windows 2000/XP	Video: 128MB DirectX 9
Processor: 2.4 GHz CPU	Sound: EAX sound
Memory: 512MB RAM	Internet: Broadband

It's been one hell of a good year for first-person shooters on PC. The highlight reel includes the *Rambo*-style thrills of Far Cry, Daniel Garner's jaunt through twisted purgatory in Painkiller, the intense military maneuvers of Joint Operations and United Offensive, and the robust futuristic combat of UT 2004 and Tribes: Vengeance. Though each of these titles offers loads of great gameplay, the first *serious* FPS arrived in August with id's awesome Doom 3, as it provided a diabolical glimpse into the future of horror-shooter design through scintillating atmospheres of light and shadow. And now, with Half-Life 2, we have the year's finest first-person shooter and easily one of 2004's best games. HL2 is a fundamentally superior gaming experience that positively radiates competence and power across its tightly focused action campaign.

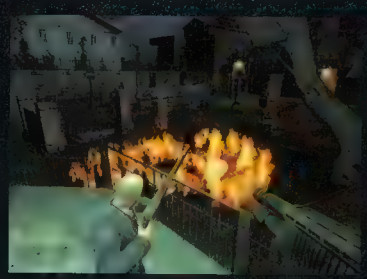
Stripped of its hype-induced hysteria and lore, and isolated as a pure action showcase, Half-Life 2 is one of the most satisfying efforts in recent years. Basically, you get it *all* here, and it's fueled by cutting-edge execution: intense gunfights and driving, pinpoint navigation, uncompromising enemy AI, amazing physics and perfect pacing, all firmly rooted in the spectacle of action storytelling and devoid of monotony. The sliver of backtracking you will partake in is strictly incidental, as new objectives and paths steadily emerge. Enemy placement and abilities are totally in tune with level design, from the motion-sensitive Antlions burrowed along the coastal stretch to the frenzied roof-hopping abominations in cursed Ravenholm, and witnessing the great enemy AI routines can be just as rewarding as ending them. With each environment designed as a huge playground of physically simulated objects, progress frequently hinges on the use of physics. This design doesn't come off as contrived novelty, either: while the environmental puzzles and accompanying props are deliberate and often essential to moving forward, there's a degree of integration with each level's theme that feels completely natural. The impact of

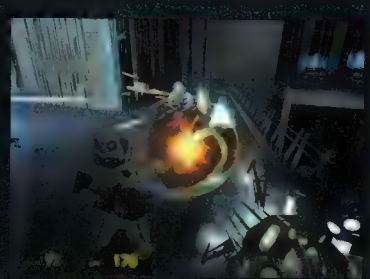
"Stripped of its hype-induced hysteria and lore, and isolated as a pure action showcase, Half-Life 2 is one of the most satisfying efforts in recent years."

these physics can be hugely entertaining as well. Once you acquire the Gravity Gun, you'll enjoy puppeteer-like control over dozens of objects, and it's an incredibly fun and empowering play mechanic. You can toss crates, saw blades and explosive barrels into enemies, line up boxes and scrap metal to form ramps, or use the reverse polarity of the gun to flip vehicles and clear large debris. No shooter has modeled mass and inertia with such conviction, and it filters down into every element of action, including driving—whether tearing across highways or skimming along canals. As a stand-alone action title, Half-Life 2's sophistication and polish is miles ahead of most of its contemporaries.

Millions of fans of the original game are expecting another mature and engaging story to guide the action, and the sequel delivers this with the extra fortification of top-notch production. Half-Life 2's plot casts Gordon Freeman in the role of hero of the people, as the City 17 populace is herded and oppressed by Combine forces under the command of propaganda-spewing Dr. Breen. The voice work for every character across the real-time narrative is first rate, from the most critical supporting lead like Alyx Vance to the nameless resistance fighters trudging through the city's battle-ravaged streets. The facial animation technology of this engine really does a fantastic job with lip-syncing and expressions, and these affecting visual cues often bolster the excellent dialogue and voice acting. It's amusing to see your eager squad mates wince and apologize with a "Sorry Dr. Freeman" when they bump into you—though it's far less amusing when they smother you. Finally, and without spoiling anything, it's safe to say that Half-Life 2's great plotline will provide fans with many answers while leaving several other questions temporarily on pause.

After six years of development, Valve has had ample time to coax the very best performance out of their Source engine, and Half-Life 2's presentation thrives inside this powerful technology. All of the prerequisites are given a stellar treatment. The lighting and texture effect work are acutely refined and the water shader they've concocted here is gorgeous.





Gunfire and explosions are pretty much perfect, as evidenced by the astonishing impact of the Strider's charge blast, though the flame effects look a tad incongruous. Environmental designs such as City 17's spectacular European architecture bear testament to Valve's artistic prowess, and the wide-open outdoor levels during the driving sequences demonstrate incredible depth and vast horizons. The seamless character models run the gamut between generously and ridiculously detailed, and the animation, apart from a little unsightly "moonwalking" (as characters beckon you to follow), is of the highest caliber across the board. Wait until you see Alyx's pet robot Dog go to town…this is fantastic stuff. Rounding out the presentation is Half-Life 2's magnificent sound design. Although the atmosphere generated by Doom 3's sweeping industrial malevolence remains artistically triumphant, HL2's overall timbre of booming, stylized action sounds and high-energy combat tunes is a stronger technical achievement. And yet it's not without its own wickedly harrowing organic effects, as the bizarre screeches of incoming alien gunships will confirm. We didn't experience the full potential of this engine in Counter-Strike: Source, but Half-Life 2 makes it emphatically clear how finely tuned Valve's remarkable design suite really is.

There is one point that must be mentioned: HL2's length, which, at 16 to 20 hours, is a bit shorter than we had hoped for. Now, the reason why this doesn't affect the value of the game is twofold: A) Half-Life 2 is arguably the perfect length. In those 16 to 20 hours, you will experience a brilliant, fully realized action shooter that rewards you with gaming gold on a minute-by-minute basis. And B) In theory, if you stop to soak in every conceivable physics scenario—and there are dozens deliberately scattered about just for the sake of *being there*—the game's length would substantially increase. At any rate, every Half-Life 2 package, whether at retail or via Steam download, includes Counter-Strike: Source as the game's multiplayer component. You can't get much better than that for added value and gameplay.

Half-Life 2 lives up to the all-time classic status of the original game, and in doing so, it becomes an essential part of your PC library and an easy contender for game of the year. This new era of dynamic gameplay also reinforces Valve's status as an elite developer. Now that the Source engine is running on all cylinders, let's hope they can roll out Half-Life 3 in a much shorter timeframe. We can't wait to see what lies ahead for Gordon Freeman.

Mike Griffin

Developer: Valve Software
Publisher: VU Games
Available: November

Stronghold 2

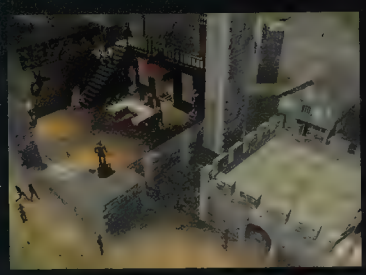
Castle life and fiefdom strife as war looms — Preview

Recommended system specs (tentative)

OS: Win 2K/XP	Video: 128 MB T&L
CPU: 2.0 GHz	Sound: DirectSound
Memory: 512 MB	Internet: Broadband

With over 1.5 million units sold, Stronghold and its Crusader expansion have developed a very strong international following. Once again bridging the gap between castle building, siege battles and intricate castle life management, Stronghold 2 is poised to modernize the unique hybrid formula with a huge engine and features update. We queried Firefly Studios head Simon Bradbury for his take on the direction of the sequel. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: Firefly Studios
Publisher: Global Star
Available: Q1 2005



Interview

Simon Bradbury, director of Firefly Studios

play: Will players be working on behalf of the ousted king in Stronghold 2?
Simon Bradbury: Yes and no—the storyline will have a degree of choice in it. Initially, the player will be trying to discover the king's fate. They will have more help in the form of allies than they did in the original and they will certainly need it!

S2 again merges RTS and castle sim gameplay. How have you expanded upon these elements?
S2 will have greater depth in both areas. It is fair to say that the sim side is deeper in terms of more building types, resource chains and the new "Honor" concept. However, the RTS side has many new units and castle tricks and traps. Overall, we are looking to keep a good mix and give the player a bit more breathing space between the patches of intense combat.

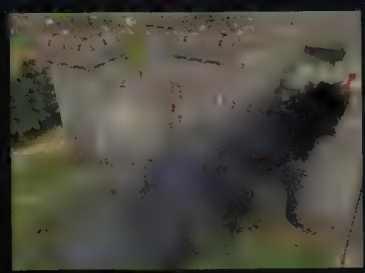
What are some of the different perks you receive as a feared dictator and, conversely, a benevolent ruler?
Evil lords will have far greater efficiency of production, as their peasants fear them, which will be a huge advantage—but their troops will be weaker and they will tend to have a lot of crime and disease. Good lords, on the other hand, will have a very happy and trusting peasantry that will do far less work. They will, however, fight better and occasionally build a statue to their lord providing a steady influx of Honor—making a good lord a better long-term bet.

Tell us about some of the castle customization you're planning for S2.
Part of the fun and skill of the game will be learning to become an accomplished castle designer. Stronghold 2 is completely unrivaled in allowing the player to create the castle of their imagination. You can adorn your custom fortress layouts with objects, flags and banners, and these will be customizable from an in-depth selection system. We will ship with a flexible terrain editor, so people can design their own locations for their castles, with cliff edges and even windswept beaches. They can even build in the middle of a marsh should they wish!

What sort of new direction are you taking with infantry and siege units?
There will be more than twice as many unit types as the original to slice, smash, pierce, incinerate and generally pulverize your foes. Some of the more popular unit types from Crusader will be available to hire, such as the assassin. There will be a lot of new siege equipment and castle defense technology, and we are working hard to ensure that they are better balanced this time around so that every piece has its place in the game.

The first game has enjoyed an enduring fan base. How will you keep players glued to S2?
We're giving players many ways to enjoy Stronghold 2. We will be aiming to re-create the chaos and drama of big sieges. You can be combat oriented or you can choose to focus on the straight sim aspects. Within these two groupings there are also many play modes. We'll have rich campaigns with historical castles to defend, skirmish, multiplayer, sand box and custom maps. With Stronghold 1, there are tens of thousands of user-created scenarios out there for people to download and play, so we will be ensuring that our new map and scenario editor is better than ever.

> "Stronghold 2 is completely unrivaled in allowing the player to create the castle of their imagination."
>
> -Simon Bradbury, director of Firefly Studios



Devout Stronghold fans would likely be satisfied with an engine update, but Firefly is preparing a horde of great new features for the sequel. Whether you get your kicks spying on the lady of the castle during her daily bath, watching other lords quibble over deeds, or crafting a force of siege weapons to send your foes to a fiery death, Stronghold 2 will have you covered.

Men of Valor

Great action marred by clumsy transitions — Review

Recommended system specs	
OS: Windows XP	Video: 128 MB GeForce 5700
CPU: 2.8 GHz+	Sound: Dx compatible
Memory: 512 MB	Internet: Broadband

What triggered the late '90s boom in modern-era war shooters? Was it the arrival of powerful 3D technology, or perhaps films like *Saving Private Ryan*? In any case, a ton of FPS war games appeared, based on real-world battlefields from WW2 and beyond, and 2015's Vietnam-based shooter Men of Valor is the latest to be drafted. Visually, MoV wavers between crude set-up screens, terrible lip-sync and inexplicably stuttered animations, and great foliage depth, good explosions and pretty decent water. The game's over-dependence on scripted events is simultaneously its greatest asset and weakness. Between the raucous adults-only dialogue of your squad mates and plenty of surprising scripted twists in battle, Men of Valor can be absolutely thrilling when everything is functioning. Sadly, between event triggers, your squad will often go completely numb. They'll stare off in the opposite direction while being fired upon from a few feet away, and with bullets and blood splattering off their backs and the VC enemy screaming, "F'ck you, G.I.!" at the top of their lungs...still, no reaction. Thick-skinned marines, we presume. Yet as soon as a new phase of the script kicks in, your crew is stomping along and firing away. If you're looking for an action game with serious polish, this is not the one. As a Vietnam War shooter, with its strong themes and unforgiving violence, Men of Valor succeeds.
Mike Griffin

Developer: 2015
Publisher: VU Games
Available: October

Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault

Huge campaign and historical impact — Preview

Recommended system specs	
OS: Win 2K/XP	Video: 128 MB Dx9
CPU: 2.0 GHz+	Sound: DirectSound
Memory: 512 MB RAM	Internet: Broadband

With Battle for Middle Earth on deck and Medal of Honor: Pacific Assault now on shelves, EA LA is quickly becoming one of the publisher's top development studios. The Pacific Assault team absorbed feedback from hardcore MoH players and went the extra mile to deliver a spectacular sequel. The new engine draws huge physics-laden environments and striking pyrotechnics across Pearl Harbor, Guadalcanal and other meticulously rendered historical locations. Unlike the first game's total reliance on scripting, the NPC AI is now adaptive and will take cover or execute other self-preserving routines. You may also administer Squad Control commands to nudge them along. Across the campaign's 25+ levels you'll find optional "Hero" tasks. These refreshing sub-missions will yield spoken flashback mementos that you can collect in the game's front-end Locker area. The multiplayer game has been allocated serious resources with MoH Breakthrough expansion developers TKO on board to execute a tight multi-class team focus in new objective-oriented modes. Finally, Pacific Assault is absolutely stuffed with historical data—so much so that you can toggle a "Pop-Up Facts" option that relays all manner of situational WW2 details, trivia and statistics in real-time. Replaying the campaign with this option enabled is a real eye-opening experience. **Mike Griffin**

Developer: EA LA
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: November

Need For Speed Underground 2

Killer appeal street racer now roams free — Preview

Recommended system specs	
OS: Win 2K/XP	Video: 128 MB Dx9, Pixel shader
CPU: 2.0 GHz+	Sound: Dx9
Memory: 512 MB RAM	Internet: Broadband

The first Need for Speed Underground became a massive hit for a number of reasons. Besides the quality of the game itself, it arrived at a time when the car-modding scene was beginning to thrive. In a bid to ride that heat wave, yet conscious of the probability of a sequel, the developers of the original NFSU decided to shuffle some features to the side. One of these features is a fleshed out career mode set in a huge free-roaming urban expanse, and this massive five-district metropolis has become the highlight of Need for Speed Underground 2. The customization options have been vastly expanded, and Style Points track deeper into finesse techniques and incidentals like powerslides and near misses. Every Style Point gained adds to your nitrous, accumulating into potentially *huge* boosts. In this frenetic racing world, collisions are inevitable, and the improved damage modeling adds an allure to the impact. The PC version looks fantastic at high resolutions with full-screen anti-aliasing cranked up to smooth out every edge on environments and vehicles. The jury's out on the lasting depth of NFSU2's multiplayer game, but with over 30 vehicles, a huge city and a handful of sprint, outrun and drift modes, it should be interesting
Mike Griffin

Developer: EA Canada
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: November

Scrapland

Robots in the skies and in disguise | Review

Recommended system specs

OS: Win 2K/XP	Video: 64 MB Dx9 compatible
CPU: 2.0 GHz	Sound: DirectSound compatible
Memory: 512 MB	Internet: 56.6 K+

It's always cool when a game catches you completely off-guard and for all the right reasons. Such is the case with Mercury Steam's Scrapland, presented by American McGee. Scrapland is set on a robot planet called Chimera. You play as newcomer D-Tritus, a self-made robot who has journeyed to Chimera in search of work. Upon arrival, the only job available is a post at the local news agency. D-Tritus signs on, and it doesn't take him long to become embroiled in the city's strange activities, legal or otherwise.

Think of Scrapland as GTA in space, with robots and dark humor, and you have the general idea. You can roam a number of districts, randomly jacking docked gunships to buzz around and attack traffic for cash drops while melting down pursuing cops. The ship mode engine is impressive, drawing colorful and complex techno-cityscapes loaded with hi-tech buildings, access tunnels and all manner of strobe-lit freeways and portals to adjoining destinations. While these missions are entertaining thanks to the great city designs and solid controls, they skirt dangerously close to tedium later in the game as a limited variety of gameplay is recycled with only minor variations. The racing missions stay pretty fresh the entire way through and may pique the interest of Wipeout fans. The backbone of ship combat and racing involves an interesting shipbuilding system. You may keep several ships in a personal hangar, and as you locate new plans, you can tinker away at hull density, weapon and engine configurations. In theory, this shipbuilding is a great idea, but more often than not you'll ascend to one linear "ultimate gunship" at each tier, as opposed to assembling a few specially designed ships built to handle different situations. Regardless, the whole shipbuilding angle is certainly a great incentive to keep your funds healthy, as you can take your vessel online for some multiplayer shenanigans.

The indoor missions rely on the gameplay hook of shape changing (called "Overwriting" here) into 15 different robots, each providing specific powers to tackle objectives. This is a great concept, and some missions actually leave room for flexibility with regards to viable robot combinations. You'll use particular robots for rescue missions, spying or snagging ship plans from obscure locations, and each level has loads of terminals for swapping 'bots. The patrolling authorities aren't big on hacking, so there's also a degree of stealth involved with Overwriting.

Scrapland comes very close to achieving greatness. Some recycled gameplay concepts wear thin, and there are some voice and text issues, but there's a ton of content and the solid controls help to hold the game together. Also, this universe has a strangely addictive charm. Scrapland is a pretty shocking effort from a small developer, in terms of ambition and production quality. We should expect great things from Mercury Steam in the future, and hopefully American McGee will be on board.

Mike Griffin

Developer: Mercury Steam
Publisher: Enlight Interactive
Available: December

"Scrapland is a pretty shocking effort from a small developer, in terms of ambition and production quality."

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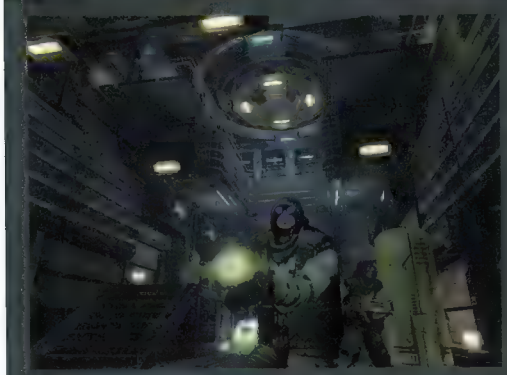
Postscript

Mojo rising for Pariah



Groove Games is seriously ramping up its marketing efforts for forthcoming shooter Pariah as they announce a partnership with high-profile production company Mojo to assemble promotional trailers for the game. You've witnessed Mojo's quick-fire trailer direction on films like *The Matrix, Troy, xXx, The Last Samurai*, and *T3: Rise of the Machines*. "After seeing Mojo's work on some of the most memorable movie trailers in Hollywood, there was no question in our minds that they were the choice to produce a series of trailers for Pariah," said Jon Walsh, CEO of Groove Games. Michael Kahane, co-owner of Mojo, added, "To communicate the scope and breadth of the Pariah universe, Mojo is creating four epic theatrical-quality trailers that will immerse the viewer into the game well before they have a controller in hand." Pariah, slated for PC and Xbox in 2005, is Digital Extremes' first major IP since helming multiple Unreal projects in conjunction with Epic, and it's definitely one of the big names to watch for next year.

NCsoft hosts ghoulish special events

Over the course of the Halloween weekend, NCsoft released unique content across their game servers to darken the mood and lighten spirits. With special events, characters and rewards based on the themes of Halloween, such as a scourge of undead in Lineage 2 and a perpetual night in City of Heroes (a welcome proposition for nasty lycanthropes), NCsoft treated their players to a memorable weekend of tricks and treats.

NPD Top PC Games

Sales figures 10/03/04 to 10/09/04

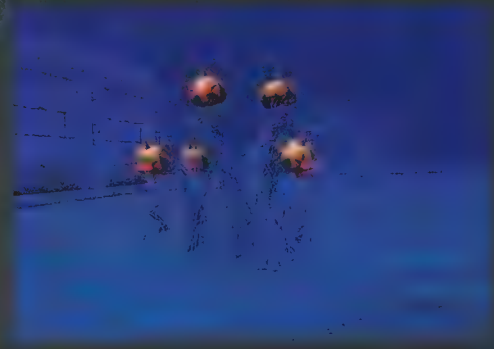
01	The Sims 2 / EA Games
02	Rome: Total War / Activision
03	Star Wars: Battlefront / LucasArts
04	Call of Duty: United Offensive / Activision
05	Myst IV Revelation / Ubisoft
06	The Sims Deluxe / EA Games
07	Warhammer 40k: Dawn of War / THQ
08	Doom 3 / Activision
09	Call of Duty / Activision
10	FFXI Online: Chains of Promathia / Square Enix

Beta blueprint for City of Villains

Cryptic Studios and NCsoft have announced a preliminary plan for selecting testers to explore the content of their upcoming MMO, City of Villains. Basically, the longer you've been a paid subscriber to City of Heroes, the greater your chance for entry. In accordance with this qualification system, players who have been signed-up to CoH for 12 months will instantly be admitted to the Villains beta test when it opens next year. While some may perceive this as a plot to reward those who invest money in the game, CoH's lead designer Jack Emmert instead views it as a reward for those who have invested time and effort. "It makes sense for us to offer this incentive to our most dedicated players," Jack explains. "Who else would be more capable of assisting us in the beta test than the folks most familiar with the way City of Heroes works?" The pseudo-sequel is scheduled to introduce the first implementation of player-versus-player combat to Cryptic's comic book-inspired universe.

Zboard secures high profile MMO keysets

Billed as "The Ultimate Gaming Keyboard," Ideazon's Zboard has certainly garnered the support of many influential developers and publishers. Employing a base unit and interchangeable overlays, swapping in a custom Zboard keyset takes about 10 seconds and you're ready to play a new game. With Madden, Medal of Honor, Civilization 3 and other high-profile keysets available, Ideazon somehow secured an official Doom 3 keyset earlier this year, and the design turned out to be a highly functional boon to newly converted PC gamers. After Doom 3, we seriously wondered how the Zboard folks would follow up during the crucial fall and Christmas retail season. Well, they've just scored a double coup with the official EverQuest II and World of Warcraft keysets. Consider the complexity of massively multiplayer online RPGs for a moment: the quantity of shortcuts, hot-bars and special commands for quest logs, maps, grouping and trade skills might be overwhelming for genre newcomers. With these exclusive Zboard keysets, you have all the aforementioned commands and one-touch character emotes, plus several other clearly labeled MMO conveniences across an intelligent layout ideal for long dungeon crawls with good friends. As with previous models, each of these Zboard keysets features official full-color game artwork, fonts and logos from their respective titles.



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PlayStation.2

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Nintendo DS Launch Special

DUAL MASTERS

Nintendo feels the future of handheld gaming

Words: **Chris Hoffman**

Dual screens. Wireless multiplayer. Touch-screen capabilities. Voice recognition. You know about the features; you've heard the hype. Now the Nintendo DS is here, and if everything goes as Nintendo plans, it will forever change the landscape of handheld gaming.

"[The DS] truly is the first step to revolutionizing this business and points the way forward for Nintendo overall," said Nintendo executive vice president of sales and marketing Reggie Fils-Aime at the Nintendo's Gamers' Summit held this past October in Seattle. "We think that gamers want new experiences, new ways to play, new types of games in order for them to be satisfied in a portable experience. We want to make gaming better and different, not just more of the same."

In addition to hyping the unique features of the DS, Fils-Aime also touted the durability, battery life and reasonable $150 price tag of the unit, speculating that the competition—Sony's upcoming (and very sexy) PSP—won't be able to come close to the DS in these regards. He also indicated that the PSP's superior graphics and traditional gameplay won't give gamers the new experiences that they crave.

"...Consumers are already saying that, from a graphics standpoint, things can't get much better," Fils-Aime stated. "Graphically, things already look photorealistic. Pushing the agenda from a graphics standpoint really is gonna be a dead-end road that ends in a hard brick wall."

While that remains to be seen, there's no doubt—judging from what we've played, seen and felt so far—that the Nintendo DS is loaded with potential to take gaming to great new places. However, the games revealed at this point tend to fall into two categories: familiar games that are a lot of fun, and new types of games that really take advantage of the DS' capabilities yet may or may not possess long-term appeal. Read on to learn more about what you'll be playing on Nintendo's innovative new handheld in the weeks and months to come.

> "We want to make gaming better and different, not just more of the same."
>
> *-Reggie Fils-Aime, Nintendo executive VP of sales and marketing*

Tech Specs

Release date: November 21, 2004 (U.S.), December 2, 2004 (Japan)
Price: $149.99
CPU: One ARM9 and one ARM7
Resolution *(per screen)*: 256 x 192 pixels with .24 mm dot pitch
Colors *(per screen)*: 260,000
Sound: Stereo speakers with "virtual surround sound"
Size *(closed)*: 5.85" W x 3.33" L x 1.13" H
Controls: Touch screen; built-in microphone; digital control pad; A, B, X and Y face buttons; L and R shoulder buttons; Start and Select buttons
Input/Output: Slot for DS game cards; separate slot for Game Boy Advance cartridges; headphone jack; external microphone jack
Wireless Communication: IEEE 802.11 and Nintendo's proprietary format; 30-100 foot range
Battery: Lithium ion battery providing six to 10 hours of play per charge
Other: Embedded PictoChat software; embedded clock with date, time and alarm; stylus included

PictoChat

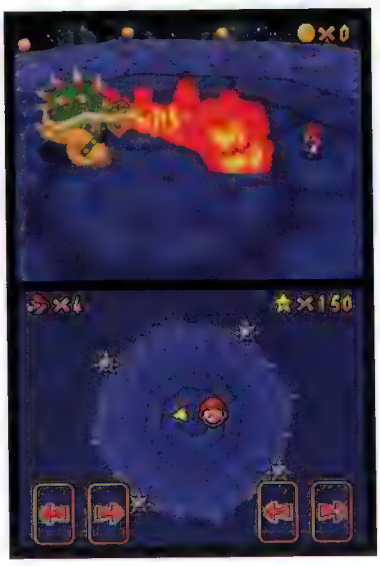
GAMES

"The games are absolutely fabulous!"

Super Mario 64 DS

Far more than just a port of the revolutionary Nintendo 64 game, Super Mario 64 adds new levels, 30 more collectable stars (for a total of 150) and three additional playable characters—Luigi, Yoshi and Wario, each with unique abilities—into the single-player experience. To compensate for the lack of the camera buttons, players will tap the touch screen to adjust the camera; alternately, the touch screen can be used as an analog controller to move Mario around. Loads of touch screen minigames and a four-player versus mode are also included in this flagship DS title.

Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: November (launch)



Metroid Prime: Hunters: First Hunt

While the full version of Metroid Prime: Hunters will hit around February, at launch, DS owners will be treated to a free demo titled First Hunt. Focusing on action instead of exploration, the game includes three single-player modes—Regulator (basically training for multiplayer combat), Survival (kill as many enemies as possible) and Morph Ball (a timed race)—as well as multiplayer battles. Five control types are offered, including one that's stylus-free.

Developer: NST (Nintendo Software Technologies)
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: November (launch)

Spider-Man 2

More than any other game in the DS' launch line-up, Spider-Man 2 seems to be an ideal mix of traditional gameplay enhanced by the DS' unique features. 2D gameplay blends with 3D visuals to create a modern action game experience, and the touch screen lets players switch between Spider-Man's special moves—such as impact webbing, a slide kick, back flip, web yank and lightning punch—on the fly. The real innovation comes during boss fights, however, when the action periodically switches to a touch screen sub-game where you'll have to get creative with Spidey's offense to survive. Although it's based on the movie, new scenarios and bosses, such as Vulture and Mysterio, appear throughout the game's 14 levels.

Developer: Vicarious Visions
Publisher: Activision
Available: November (launch)

play: How did Spider-Man 2 come about as your first project for the DS?
Bala: ...When we heard that the DS was coming out, we really wanted to do something a little bit different and something that was going to get noticed and really try and pull out all the stops. We knew that we had a short development time for the project and Activision came to us and said, "Hey, you know, we've got Spider-Man. You know, the DVD's coming out and it might be a good time if you want to do something." We had previously done Spider-Man on Game Boy Color, and that was our first big breakout title for Game Boy Color, and then we did Spider-Man: Mysterio's Menace for GBA, which came out shortly after Tony Hawk 2. So it was great to kind of go back to Spidey, and there was a lot of excitement on the team...

So why start off a new project from scratch instead of building off of the console versions?
...Vicarious Visions has always prided ourselves in pushing the envelope in terms of what hardware can do and creating a compelling experience for that hardware platform. And we did that on Game Boy Color; we did that on GBA; we want to do that on DS. ...That's always been a philosophy. So we didn't want to try and do a me-too kind of product, and we wanted to show that the DS can do something meaningful in terms of gameplay experience and not just something that could be kind of kitschy or something that's a novelty that wears out...

So do you think you're really taking advantage of the DS' capabilities?
We're just scratching the surface. You know, we really feel we've done a pretty good job for launch and so far the response has been very positive, that it's really showing off some of the capabilities of the hardware, but we're just getting started.

Why a 2D/3D hybrid instead of full 3D?
We wanted to have a really pick-up-and-play experience on handheld, and...you don't have analog sticks to mess with the camera. [We] didn't want the camera getting in the way. And Spidey is a unique character in that he can crawl on any surface, get into really weird spots, and we didn't want to have anything like that be intrusive to the player...

Were there any particular influences on the creation of the game?
Sure. The joke around the office is that this is "Viewtiful Spidey." Viewtiful Joe has been an inspiration.

Yeah, he has that slow-mo, doesn't he?
He does, and it works, you know. It's the Spidey Sense, and it's true to the license. Even in the Spider-Man film, everything slows down around Spider-Man and he can react at normal speeds. That worked out pretty nicely. And I think that for us, we're a lot of old-school gamers, and we wanted to see how we could make the 3D graphics also play into the gameplay, and the slow-mo is

"...our fundamental belief is that 2D is a format, not a restriction, and we've been able to convince some publishers of that." *-Karthik Bala, CEO, Vicarious Visions*

Touch screen minigames like this one are seamlessly incorporated into Spider-Man 2.

not something you could do with sprites...

How do you think it improves over previous handheld Spider-Man games?
I think that the combat system and the handling are much smoother, and Spidey himself has a wider range of moves. Spidey has more than 4,000 frames of animation, just him, which is incredible, especially for a handheld title. That's like console-level kind of animation, and that's far in excess of anything from previous handheld games. I think, to put that in perspective, Mysterio's Menace had...500 [or] 600 frames of animation for Spidey. So, you know, there's a big difference. So we're able to do that. Doc Ock, the way he's animated, he has 165 bones in his body, with all of his tentacles, which is actually even really impressive for a console game...

And even though it's based on the movie, you've expanded on that, and you're not just limited to movie stuff.
It is the Spider-Man 2 game, so it's based around the key events in the movie...but then we fill in kind of the gaps that the movie doesn't and expand on it. We even introduce additional villains into the game, including Mysterio. There's a subplot where Mysterio takes over this museum and you need to break into this museum, and it's really pretty creepy and he's got robots that are running around the city. We also have the Vulture, who's set up traps around the city for Spidey, and there's a lot of touch screen minigames, like he's got bombs set up around the city and you've gotta go in and defuse the bomb, so you use the touch screen where you're trying to pull the pin out without having it explode, and then you face off against Vulture on top of a skyscraper, and you can see the whole city around you. It's beautiful.

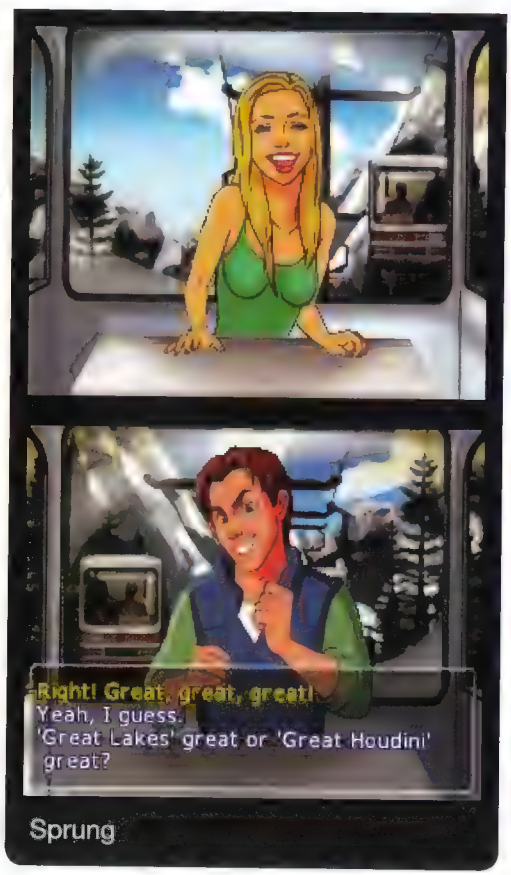
How did the idea come about for the touch screen minigames?
Well, the touch screen is used during combat in the main game, but we also wanted to do something that's never been done before with boss fights. Boss fights are typically designed in stages, and it gets progressively harder once you get the boss down to a certain health. So we took that simple idea and expanded on it where we said, "All right, we're really going to really change it up, and we're really going to make it frenetic." So in the Doc Ock fight, for example...he gets angry to a point where it goes into a first-person mode and the action switches to the bottom screen, the touch screen, and Doc Ock is throwing all kinds of debris at you while you're on the train, and you have to stop the debris [with] impact webbing, by touching wherever it is...

Since you've indicated Vicarious Visions is a big fan of 2D gameplay, where do you see 2D gameplay going in the future?
You know, we love 2D gameplay, and Spider-Man 2 DS is a hybrid 3D game, 2D gameplay, and our fundamental belief is that 2D is a format, not a restriction, and we've been able to convince some publishers of that. This isn't the last of the 3D/2D hybrid games from VV. There's potential for this to become a really interesting subgenre of gaming. As we've gone through this project, a whole new world of gameplay has started to open up to us, and we're committed to exploring that.

Ridge Racer DS

The arcade-style driving of Ridge Racer returns on the DS. The game just feels right, with the cars handling extremely well using the digital control pad, though touch screen analog control and a stylus steering wheel option are available if you prefer. Twenty tracks await, and some of the cars feature classic gaming paint jobs, such as a Mario car and a Pac-Man car.

Developer: NST (Nintendo Software Technologies)
Publisher: Namco
Available: November (launch)



Sprung

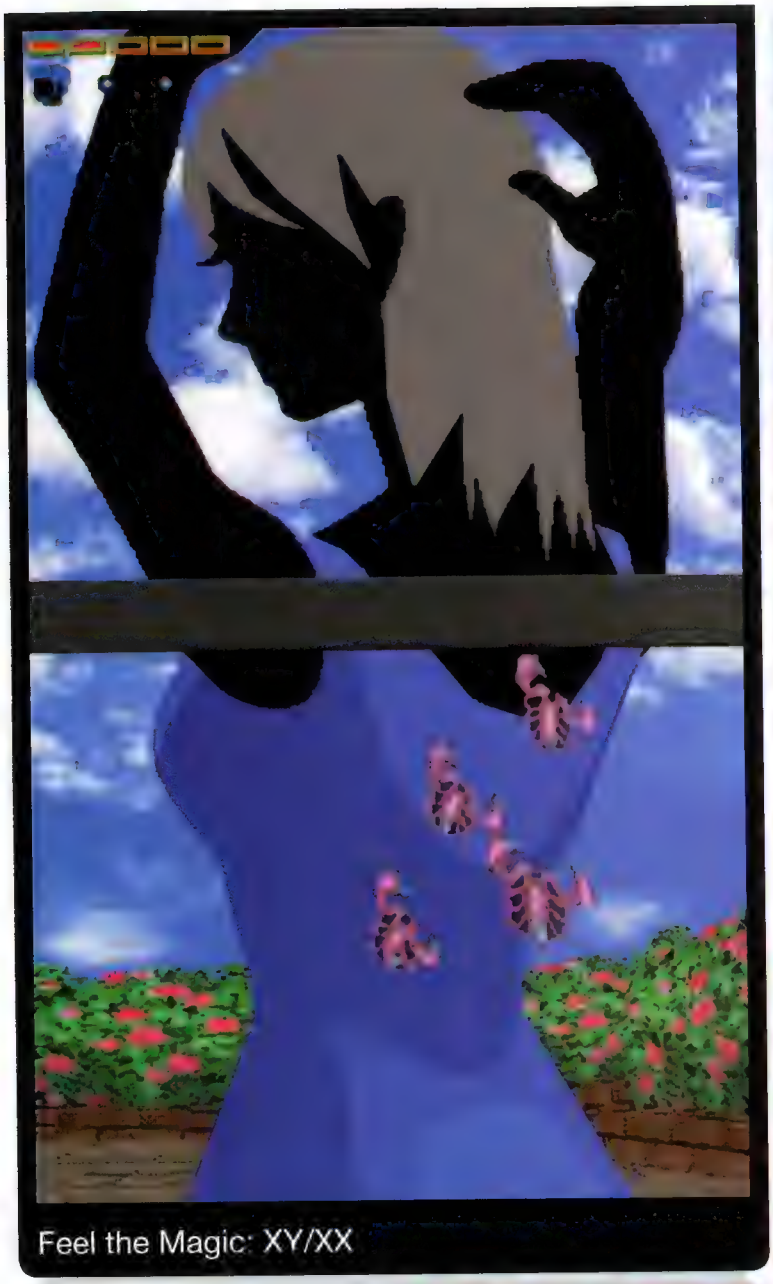
Think of it as a graphic adventure mixed with a dating sim. Or maybe an interactive soap opera. However you look at it, Sprung is unlike any other game out there, as you engage in virtual conversation to give various characters advice on their love lives. With high-quality visuals and a writer from Fox's *North Shore* behind it, could this mature title appeal to a yet untapped niche?

Developer: Guillemot
Publisher: Ubisoft
Available: Holiday 2004

Ping Pals

Not unlike PictoChat, Ping Pals is messaging software that lets up to 16 players communicate via DS. The difference is that each player has a fully customizable avatar, and up to 2000 items can be unlocked to design him or her as you see fit. Even though text- and drawing-based minigames are also included, this game feels a bit redundant.

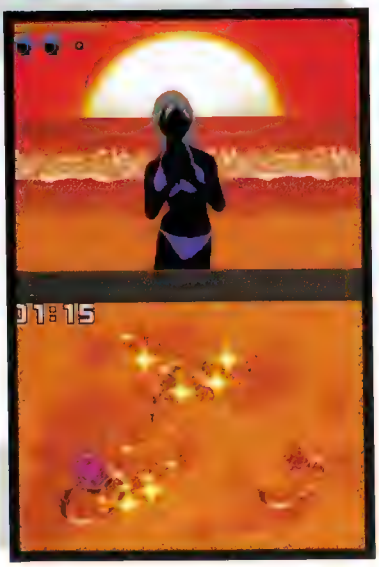
Developer: Wayforward Technologies
Publisher: THQ
Available: December



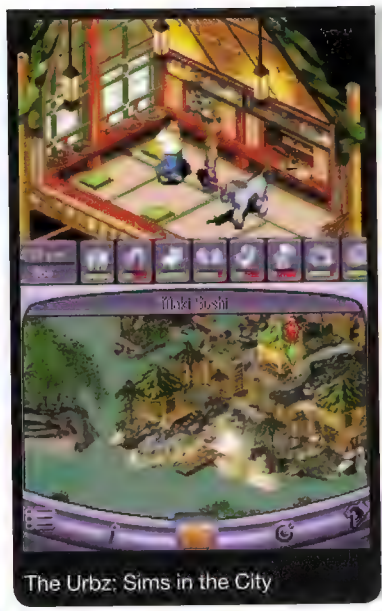
Feel the Magic: XY/XX

Quirky doesn't even begin to describe Feel the Magic. Essentially a series of minigames in which the protagonist is trying to win the affections of his dream girl, this visually stylized game will put you in scenarios in which you propel goldfish out of a man's stomach, blast stampeding bulls or rescue your babe from hungry sharks. Expect some weird looks when you start blowing into the DS' microphone.

Developer: Sonic Team
Publisher: Sega
Available: November (launch)



Diversity is king: in this segment, you must rub the screen to dig up your love's lost jewelry.



The Urbz: Sims in the City

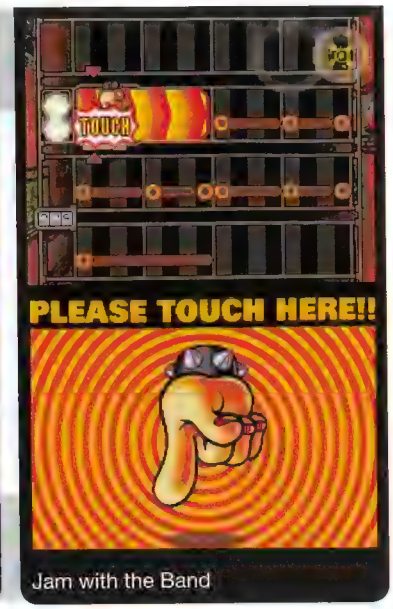
Basically an enhancement of the GBA version of The Urbs, the DS version differs from its console counterpart in that this parody of urban life is a bit more goal-oriented, although you'll still be constantly managing your character's various stats. The DS version also has an extra mission and area that its GBA sibling doesn't, along with the ability to create your own pets.

Developer: Griptonite Games
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: November (launch)

Pokémon Dash

Pokémon Dash seems extremely simplistic at first, as you drag your stylus along the touch screen to make your Pokémon race to the finish line, but as the game progresses, stages become more complex, and you'll have to ride on balloons or hop on the back of another Pokémon to make it through the stages.

Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: 2005



Jam with the Band

This rhythm game has players pushing buttons and tapping their touch screens to the beat of the music, but the unique feature here is that eight players can join in together, with each player controlling a different instrument.

Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: 2005

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005

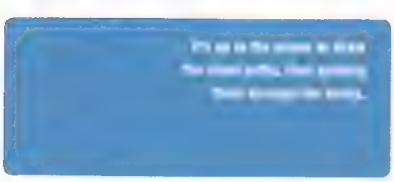
Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005 has all the features you'd expect from the series—six courses (five licensed plus one fantasy course), full character customization, real PGA pros—but it's the new touch screen control that really stands out. First rub the power bar to build up your shot strength, then trace the swing line to let the ball fly. It's a different way to play and surprisingly fun.

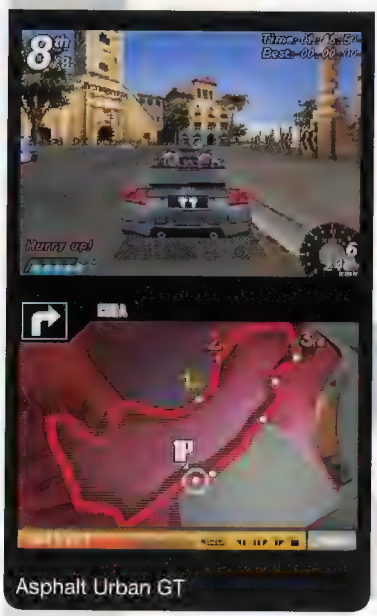
Developer: Electronic Arts
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: December

Yoshi's Touch & Go

Somewhat comparable to the classic NES light-gun game Gumshoe, Yoshi's Touch & Go features Yoshi and Baby Mario meandering through vertically and horizontally scrolling stages as the player uses the stylus to ensnare enemies, create cloud paths around obstacles, fire eggs and make Yoshi jump. Back at E3, the game was called Balloon Trip.

Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: 2005

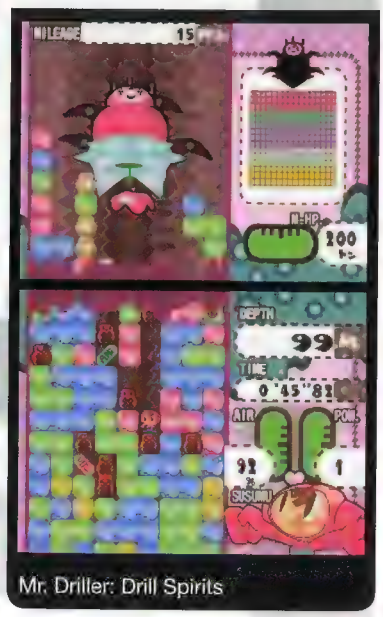




Asphalt Urban GT

Asphalt Urban GT combines the depth of a racing sim with the fun and handling of an arcade racing title. The game provides loads of features—20 licensed vehicles, nine tracks based on real locales, tuning options, vehicle-specific challenge modes, a Cop Chase mode and more. It looks pretty sharp as well.

Developer: Gameloft
Publisher: Ubisoft
Available: November



Mr. Driller: Drill Spirits

Still as addictive as ever on the DS, the two big additions to this version of Mr. Driller are the new Pressure Driller mode, in which a giant drill chases the player as he digs through the earth, and touch screen control capabilities. Aside from the traditional single-player modes, five players can compete in a versus race.

Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco
Available: November (launch)

Wario Ware, Inc. DS

Just as crazy and addictive as its GBA counterpart, Wario Ware features 180 new microgames, all of which take advantage of the touch screen or the built-in microphone. Chop vegetables, unroll toilet paper, put out fires, rotate cages, scratch an itch, draw some calligraphy… Wario Ware remains the most enjoyable game yet on the DS.

Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: 2005

Madden NFL 2005

Finally, the unstoppable Madden juggernaut is going 3D on a handheld system! Even though the visuals are more comparable to PS1 than anything else, it's still the best-looking football game on a handheld system to date (upcoming PSP version aside). The touch screen is also put to use as a simple way for choosing plays.

Developer: Electronic Arts
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: November (launch)

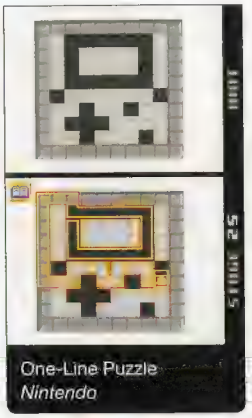
In the Works

The DS titles that follow have been shown off by Nintendo and third-party developers, but weren't available for play at Nintendo's Gamers' Summit. Note that some of the games featured here have only been announced for Japanese release.

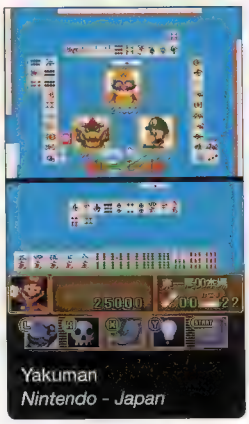
Advance Wars
Nintendo

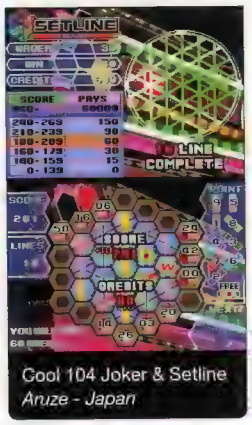
Another
Nintendo

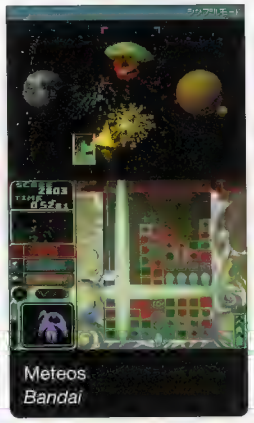
Mario Kart
Nintendo


One-Line Puzzle
Nintendo

Puppy Times
(AKA Nintendogs) *Nintendo*


Yakuman
Nintendo - Japan


Cool 104 Joker & Setline
Anuze - Japan


Meteos
Bandai

Majan Takai Mahjong Tournament *Koei - JP*

Goemon
Konami - Japan

Prince of Tennis 2005: Crystal Drive *Konami - JP*

Pac Pix
Namco

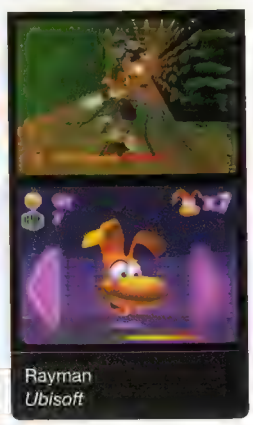
Jissen Pachislo Hisshohou! Hokuto No Ken *Sammy - JP*

Puyo Puyo Fever
Sega - Japan

Egg Monster Hero
Square Enix

Kenshui Tendo Dokuta
Spike - Japan

Zoo Keeper
Success - Japan


Rayman
Ubisoft

And Much More

This substantial list represents most of what's been announced by developers for the DS. Among the most exciting recent revelations is the remake of Final Fantasy III—it will be the game's first appearance since the Famicom original and will mark the first time the game has been released in North America.

Atari Classics (Atari)
Caduceus (Atlus)
Snowboard Kids DS (Atlus)
Mobile Suit Gundam Seed (Bandai)
Mega Man Battle Network (Capcom)
Viewtiful Joe (Capcom)
GoldenEye (EA)
Need for Speed Underground: Rivals (EA)
Bomberman (Hudson)
Dynasty Warriors (Koei)
Boktai (Konami)
Castlevania (Konami)
Dragon Booster (Konami)
Frogger 2005 (Konami)
Survival Kids (Konami)
World Soccer Winning Eleven (Konami)
Vandal-Hearts (Konami)
WINX (Konami)
Yu-Gi-Oh! Nightmare Troubadour (Konami)
Moonlight Fables (Majesco)
Nanostray (Majesco)
Animal Crossing (Nintendo)
Legend of Zelda: Four Swords (Nintendo)
Super Mario Bros. DS (Nintendo)
Pac 'n Roll (Namco)
Sonic DS (Sega)
Dragon Quest Monsters (Square Enix)
Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles (Square Enix)
Final Fantasy III (Square Enix)
Secret of Mana (Square Enix)
Slime Morimori Dragon Quest (Square Enix)
Air Assault 2 (Summitsoft Corporation)
Organizer Plus (Summitsoft Corporation)
Monster Rancher (Tecmo)
Ultimate Brain Games (Telegames, Inc.)
Ultimate Card Games (Telegames, Inc.)
Ultimate Pocket Games (Telegames, Inc.)
Cars (THQ)
The Incredibles (THQ)
SpongeBob SquarePants (THQ)
Tak (THQ)
Zoo Tycoon (THQ)
Robots (VU Games)

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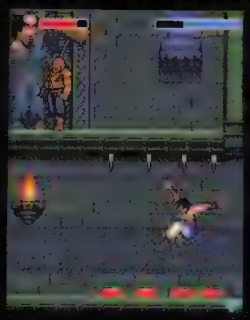


Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time

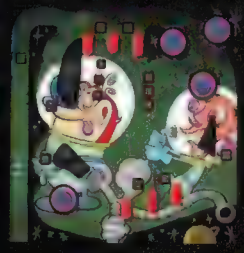
Tricked by a dying vizier, the Prince uses a magic dagger to release the Sands of Time, destroying the kingdom and turning its populace into ferocious demons. You know the drill. Now play it on your phone!

Publisher: Gameloft, Inc.

Rayman 3

Discover the latest episode of Rayman and the unique gameplay which has already won the hearts of 10 million players. Control Rayman in different worlds, rescuing fums and using his vast skills to survive the many traps and enemies in his path.

Publisher: Gameloft, Inc.



Ren & Stimpy Pinball

Ren & Stimpy arrive on your mobile in this crazy pinball game. Activate the mini-game slot machine, then match-up Ren & Stimpy images. Oddities include Booger Time that can turn the ball green and Toast Time where images turn into Toast and double in value.

Publisher: Sorrent

Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow

Once again Sam Fisher is sent where no one else can go, to do what no one else can do, in this riveting new infiltration mission for your mobile phone!

Publisher: Gameloft, Inc.

ALIENS: Unleashed

You are a United Star System Colonial Marine recruit, stationed on New Quantico, a secret training facility on a newly inhabited planet. While practicing against synthetic Aliens, the unthinkable occurs—the synths malfunction and your real training begins!

Publisher: Sorrent

DRIV3R

You are Tanner, undercover cop and fearless driver, setting out to bring down an international car theft ring on the city streets of Miami, Istanbul and Nice. Innovative mobile features include in-car and out-of-car gameplay, multiple control options and unlockable cheat codes.

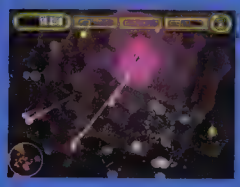
Publisher: Sorrent

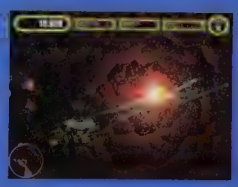
Siberian Strike Episode 1

Take your plane through three different worlds and encounter a large range of dangerous Soviet enemies. Levels feature large bombers, silent submarines and heavy war machines developed by Stalinka Corp. When they're hit, watch them sink or fall in flames! Old school shooting—on your phone!

Publisher: Gameloft, Inc.

Desktop Adventures





ALIEN FLUX

Defend the cutest, fluffiest little creatures in the galaxy from a horde of evil aliens from the fifth dimension! With only fast reactions, animal cunning and a very big laser cannon to help you, you must rescue the Fluffies as malevolent Bubbles attempt to turn them into lime jelly. Fast, fun and furious original arcade action, incredible graphics and atmospheric sound effects combine to make Alien Flux the best arcade shoot-'em-up you've played in over a decade!

Publisher: Puppy Games

Tanx

Fight in an intense tank battle to the death—in 3D! Tanx will test your skills in marksmanship, strategy and even teamwork since you can fight with up to six other players. In addition, you get four weapons with which to carry out the destruction, including missiles, nukes, grenades and mines.

Publisher: Solware Information Technology, Ltd.

Tech Center

java.com Ringtone ReMixer

The java.com Ringtone ReMixer gives you the power to create custom mixes of the hottest hits on your PC browser and send them to your mobile handset. From your PC browser to your mobile phone, it is easy to compose your own custom ringtones and caller IDs. Get your handset ringing with style!

Killer Desktop App

Project Looking Glass

What if windows were translucent so you could see multiple windows at the same time? What if you could tack a note to yourself right on the Web page you're viewing? What if your CD or movie database became a 3D jukebox? In the future, innovations from Sun Microsystems, Inc. will make these scenarios a reality. Project Looking Glass, still in early development, will harness these Java technology-based developments to bring 3D windowing capabilities to the desktop, offering a far richer user experience for work and "play."

Classic NES Series II

Castlevania

Review

Reliving Simon Belmont's original adventure through the world of Gothic horror is a great if punishing trip. The levels are well-designed and the enemies are wicked—you will either dust off those long-forgotten action game skills or you will hurl your GBA in frustration—but at least they added a save feature. The music is still awesome. I want Contra next!
Chris Hoffman B

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Konami
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: October

Dr. Mario

Review

Though Dr. Mario will never get the recognition of puzzle greats like Tetris, there's no denying that it's an addictive game in its own right. The difference is that the gratification isn't instant—but learn to build up massive chain combos and you'll appreciate Mario's brand of cerebral action. It's nice to be able to save high scores in this version. **Chris Hoffman B-**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: October

Zelda II
The Adventure of Link

Review

FIt may be considered the bastard offspring of the Zelda franchise thanks to its radical departure from the original formula—magic, an experience system and side-scrolling action are the highlights—but Zelda II is, in fact, a great adventure. It's this combination of unique elements that creates an action-RPG experience unlike any other, and it still holds up well today. **Chris Hoffman A-**

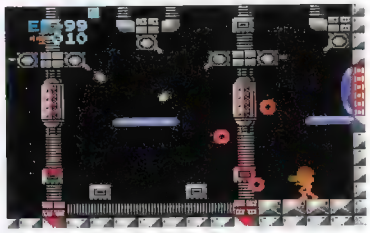
System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: October

Metroid

Review

While Metroid is a groundbreaking game that helped set an industry standard, there's just no way I can recommend this version of Samus Aran's classic adventure. If you want Metroid, get Zero Mission instead. Revel in the enhanced gameplay and visuals, then play the original that's included with it—it's identical to this one and it's essentially free. **Chris Hoffman C**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Nintendo
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: October

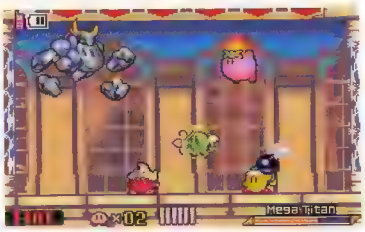


Kirby and the Amazing Mirror

Review

Kirby is still the same pink, puffy, sickeningly cute little guy he's always been, but in his latest game, Kirby and the Amazing Mirror, his adventure is growing to a scope of epic proportions. Worlds within worlds create a vast web of well-designed platforming action, taking Kirby's enemy-eating and ability-stealing gameplay—there are loads of fun powers to obtain, including a few new ones—into Metroid-like territory. Of course, since Kirby doesn't evolve throughout the adventure, it's not as fulfilling as a Metroid game, but navigating the labyrinthine worlds and thwarting the bosses is still fun. The four Kirbys aspect is also a decent idea; I don't see the need for the forced CPU-controlled allies in single-player mode, but having a multiplayer option is indeed cool. **Chris Hoffman B**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Hal Laboratory/Flagship
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: October



Duke Nukem Mobile

Review

Duke Nukem's tried-and-true campaign of saving leggy females from the hooves of hog-kind and alien scum is such a noble endeavor, it brings a tear to the eye. It's also now one of the most impressive first-person shooters available for handhelds thanks to 3D Realms' fastidious handling of the transition to Zodiac. Compared to Doom II, which is like playing through a rainy window, you wouldn't even guess Duke is on the same hardware, but with time (and the X-Forge game engine) comes progress. The game controls nicely too, especially if your Zodiac is fitted with the CommandPlay cradle, and it's rife with gore, nudity and all of the trademark Duke observations you've come to know and love.
Dave Halverson B

System: Zodiac
Developer: 3D Realms
Publisher: Tapwave
Available: Octobe

Klonoa 2: Dream Champ Tournament

Preview

For a long time it seemed that this sequel was never going to make it out of Japan, but fortunately, Namco has decided to bring back their floppy-eared titular hero in an all-new portable adventure. Rather than being a port of the PS2 classic, this version of Klonoa 2 follows squarely in the footsteps of its GBA predecessor, combining platforming, puzzle solving and collecting into five brain-bending worlds, where Klonoa's hovering ability and power to snag enemies and use them as weapons is paramount for obtaining the sun, star and moon fragments that he needs. One way in which this game does take a hint from its console sibling is the addition of pseudo-3D hoverboard stages over shimmering waterways. **Chris Hoffman**

System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Namco
Publisher: Namco
Available: February 2005

The Legend of Zelda: The Minish Cap

Preview

Just as you'd expect from a game bearing the Zelda name, The Minish Cap is shaping up to be another fantastic adventure. As a prequel to Four Swords, the story involves the power-hungry Vaati turning Zelda to stone, and the only way to save her is with the help of the Minish people, a race of extremely tiny beings. Naturally, Link embarks on another magical journey to save her, one in which the hook is that he can shrink to miniscule size thanks to the help of a magical, sentient hat. New implements will aid Link on his mission, including the Gust Jar (sucks up enemies and other objects) and Mole Mitts (can burrow through certain walls)—necessary tools for surviving the expectedly creative dungeons. **Chris Hoffman**

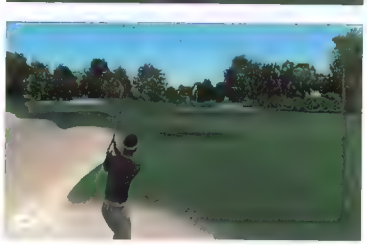
System: Game Boy Advance
Developer: Capcom
Publisher: Nintendo
Available: January 2005

Tiger Woods PGA Tour

Preview

Tiger Woods PGA Tour promises to take all of the features of the franchise's console offerings and deliver them in portable form as a PSP launch title early in 2005. Twelve authentic courses will be featured, all drawn from the 2004 and 2005 installments of the Tiger Woods series, including Pebble Beach, Paradise Cove and Sherwood Country Club. The series' renowned custom character option will be included, along with pros ranging from Tiger himself to legends like Arnold Palmer. Wireless multiplayer will be available through the PSP's Wi-Fi hookup, and EA also states that Tiger Woods PGA Tour will have "brand-new game modes that capitalize on the cutting-edge hardware features of the PSP," though they haven't revealed what that means just yet. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PSP
Developer: Team Fusion
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: March 2005



Need for Speed Underground Rivals

Preview

If the console versions aren't enough to satisfy your need for car modding and illegal street racing, then you'll be glad to know that Need For Speed Underground is making its way to Sony's PSP. (A version is also in the works for Nintendo DS.) This scaled-down version features officially licensed American muscle cars and high-performance Japanese tuners (such as the Mazda RX-8), which you can customize to your heart's content before taking them for a nighttime spin on 10 newly designed courses against three opponents. The "Rivals" in the title may be an allusion to the game's wireless multiplayer capabilities, which encourage players to go head-to-head for bragging rights over who rules the racing scene. Look for it at PSP's launch. **Chris Hoffman**

System: PSP
Developer: Team Fusion
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Available: March 2005

WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw

Reliably delivering another great main event

review

The developers at Yuke's certainly know what they're doing. 2002's Shut Your Mouth was flirting with wrestling game perfection, last year's Here Comes the Pain hovered around the same area despite some miscues, and now WWE SmackDown! vs. Raw, the series' sixth iteration, adds further refinements in an attempt to improve an already winning formula.

Since the basic grappling action of the SmackDown series was already fun, fast-paced and filled with a wealth of moves, the core gameplay hasn't changed much. Some will undoubtedly complain about the predictability, all the while returning to other sports franchises that retain the same gameplay year after year, but there are loads of subtle, enjoyable tweaks going on here—the meter-based chop battles, match-opening minigames and nifty new face/heel abilities among them. The character balance has also been thoroughly reworked and improved, so characters are not only better representations of their live counterparts, but matches are far more fair as well—Kane is no longer the ridiculously overpowered monster he was last year.

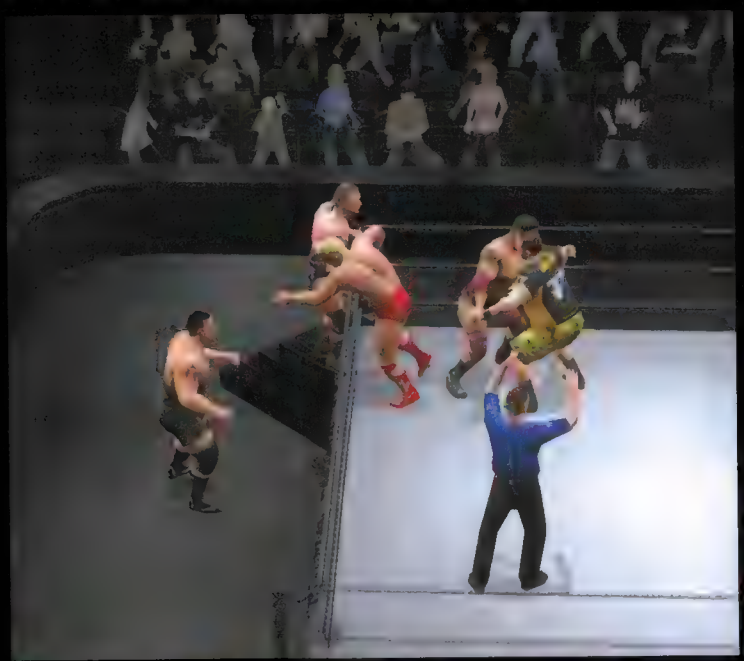
In addition, fans will notice a number of changes to season mode, not all of them for the better. The most obvious is the inclusion of full superstar voiceovers, which goes a long way toward enhancing the atmosphere. Unfortunately, this limits the scenarios somewhat, plus the optional backstage exploration/interactions have been removed. Strangely, the tag titles are nowhere to be found. Speaking of titles, the create-a-belt feature is cool, but the cost to create a decent one is ridiculous, and the fact that particular superstars don't hold them is an oversight.

On the visual side of things, while there aren't any mind-blowing character models like last year, the graphics look better on the whole. A few character faces still look off though—Orton, Benoit, Christian…I'm talkin' about you. In terms of audio, I'm glad to see commentary back, but it turned out sub-par. Moves are rarely called, or they're called erroneously, and the color that's present falls into the trap of repetitiveness.

In other regards, the classic superstars are even better this year thanks to actual theme music and entrances (although it's a drag they aren't usable in season mode), the new PPV mode is much appreciated, the custom character mode is still awesome although the streamlining is unnecessary, and the Royal Rumble is vastly improved, but not perfect. On the downside, there are still a lot of recycled animations (check out Steve Austin's oft-used mudhole stomping animation, complete with middle finger; he's not even in the game), three types of submissions seems redundant and strangely implemented (you can reverse strong holds but not weak ones?), and qualifications for forming stables is just annoying. And what's with that box art? Yikes! Then there's online—it may be limited, but at least it's there; it's really just a foundation for next year.

Some of the changes are hits, others are misses, but the bottom line is that this is another quality effort from Yuke's and THQ. **Chris Hoffman** A-

System: PlayStation 2
Developer: Yuke's
Publisher: THQ
Available: November



"...characters are not only better representations of their live counterparts, but matches are far more fair as well."

New to the chaos this year: a diva spanking meter.

ESPN NHL 2K5

review

Let's just get it out in the open right away—ESPN NHL 2K5 may be the best hockey game you'll ever play. For a measly $20, this is the ultimate in hockey—bigger hits, new moves, improved AI and gameplay that will simply make you weep. Sega has once again proven there is more to life than EA Sports.

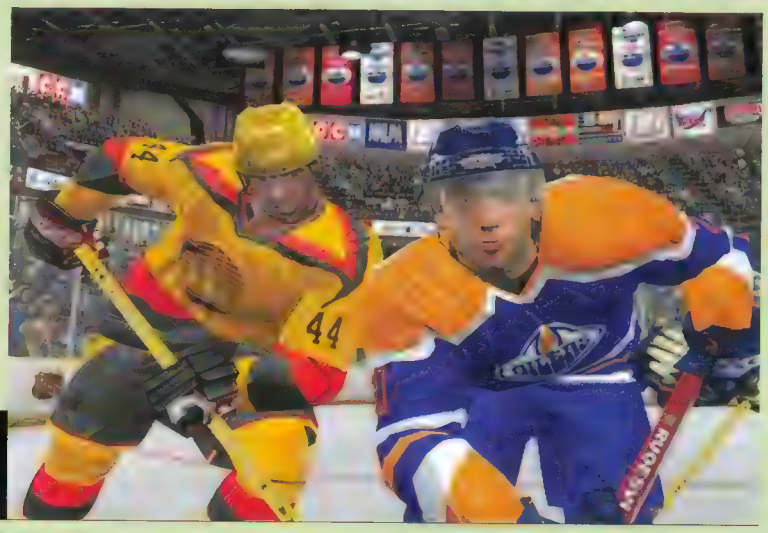
New for 2K5 is the Pass and Go system, which allows you to pass the puck to your teammate while still maintaining control of the passer. When coupled with the improved speed and flow of the gameplay, NHL 2K5 plays more like a real game of hockey than any other hockey game to date.

The controls this year are a joy, especially the new Total Stick Control, which opens up the defense tenfold. Not only can you trip up a player when you want to, you can poke check him to your heart's content. This is a nice alternative to just going out there and checking everyone to the ground. And speaking of checking, NHL 2K5 has Intense Contact Controls for some of the hardest hits you will ever see in a hockey game.

My only complaint with ESPN NHL 2K5 is the lackluster Franchise mode (especially when compared to EA's brilliant Dynasty mode in NHL 2005). Although the game has an expanded minor league roster (comprised of mostly fictional players) and a much improved scouting and drafting system, the overall feel of Franchise mode is still a bit shallow—it's all pretty much rudimentary stuff.

2K5's graphics are once again spectacular, including more in-game cutscenes. Players are not only treated to fully 3D crowds reacting to goals and power plays, but also will get to see players discussing strategies in locker rooms. Little touches like this make ESPN NHL 2K5 stand well above the competition. **Tom Ham A**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Kush Games
Publisher: Sega/Global Star
Available: September



"...NHL 2K5 plays more like a real game of hockey than any other hockey game to date."

ESPN NBA 2K5

Although not as solid as NBA Live, NBA 2K5 still takes it to the net

Be that as it may that Sega has the best football game on the market, basketball, on the other hand, is another story. Don't get me wrong, this latest NBA game is quite good, but it just shies away from greatness given how good last year's game was.

Once again, the name of the game is offense in 2K5, namely the post game. On a move-per-move level, offense outguns the defense by a wide margin. Players can execute head fakes, fade away shots and hooks with just a simple tap of the thumbstick. New moves like the Pro Hop/Drop Step make dunking a lot easier than before—almost too easy, in fact. Conversely, with such a powerful arsenal of moves on offense, the defense suffers greatly. The biggest problem with 2K5 is that there is no way to manually press up against a player—the game handles it for you—meaning that most of the time, your player will face the ball and have their back to the opponent's basket. This is all well and good, but for those times when you're fighting for position in the post or boxing out the guy with the ball, good luck making your player turn around in time to make an impact on the play.

My favorite mode from last year is still my favorite this year, and that is 24/7. For 2K5, the developers have added over 100 new items, online as well as offline multiplayer and a much cooler presentation. Improvements to IsoMotion definitely shine during 24/7 mode because it's all about you showing off.

The icing on the cake with ESPN NBA 2K5 is that you get a lot of game for only $20. It's not perfect like their football game, but it certainly comes close. **Tom Ham B+**

System: PlayStation 2, Xbox
Developer: Visual Concepts
Publisher: Sega/Global Star
Available: September

"The icing on the cake with ESPN NBA 2K5 is that you get a lot of game for only $20."

play anime

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SHINICHIRO WATANABE
(Cowboy Bebop, Animatrix)

Character designs by
KAZUTO NAKAZAWA
(Kill Bill Vol. 1, El Hazard, Black Heaven)

Production designs by
MAHIRO MAEDA
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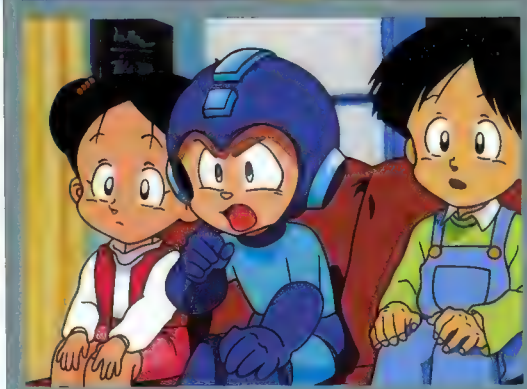
DNAngel

Family ties

Behind the facade of a quaint seaside village, Daisuke Niwa's grandfather and mother are performing bizarre rituals in the medieval dungeon below their humble abode. Mom is particularly schizophrenic, going from hooded mistress to Stepford Mom at the drop of a hat. But Daisuke, a 14-year-old with raging hormones, has other things on his mind, like finally putting the moves on his prospective girlfriend to be: the über-cute Risa Harada. After wading through the process of his ensuing defeat, things finally elevate beyond the throes of squishy puppy love to some weirdness worth bunkering down for as the family ritual comes to a head in which Daisuke, like 300 years worth of Niwa men before him, morphs into the much taller, much cooler master thief Phantom Dark...but only when there's something to steal. Two problems: 1) Dark has a rival who exists only to capture him (*cough* Lupin) and 2) after his first heist, on the flight home (did I mention he sprouts black angel wings?) he lands on Risa's veranda but ends up kissing her best friend, who sees Daisuke's visage in P. Dark's mug...and, of course, the lot of them all go to school together. *DNAngel* may alternate between sentimental and cool a little too much on the surface, but its underlying theme promises a spiral into a darker place, and the show looks great. **Dave Halverson**

Studio: ADV Films
Rating: 13 and up
Running Time: 100 minutes
Volume: 1 - "The Dawn of Dark"

"...and, of course, the lot of them all go to school together."



"Who knew 8-bit had so much power!?"

Mega Man: Upon a Star

[illegible] comes again

When young Yuta falls asleep at the controls playing Mega Man circa Famicom, Dr. Wily seizes the opportunity and escapes into the real world, Tokyo style. So what's a fifth-grader to do when his video game merges with the material world? Well, when your family is so white-bread they make the Bradys look like the Osbournes...go to school. Mom and dad barely bat an eye when the kids explain that the boy robot and talking dog standing in their room have breached the physical plane. Meanwhile, Mega Man and Rush (who speaks, it turns out) take to the streets to beat down Dr. Wily's instant armada (the man works *fast*)...but not without assistance. When depleted, the only way for MM to regain power is to have Yuta plug back into the game world for some much-needed power-ups via the game's funky animated energy cans. Now that's what I call real-time cinema. Who knew 8-bit had so much power!? This particular version of Mega Man was released in 2002 exclusively in Japan, as a kind of pseudo-educational piece...sort of like the end of *G.I. Joe* where knowing is half the battle. And while it is clearly aimed at a younger audience, any hardcore MM fan weaned on memorizing sick boss patterns will likely appreciate the dutiful handling of the source material, beloved robo-designs, and the clean, nicely animated pre-digital look. **Dave Halverson**

Studio: ADV Films
Rating: 7 and up
Running Time: 90 minutes

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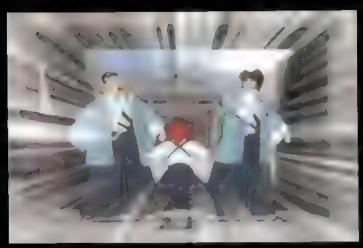
Peace Maker

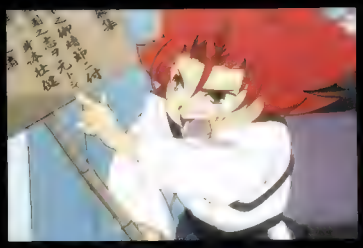
Give peace a chance

Having found the key to cloning animators, Gonzo (*Last Exile*, *Chrono Crusade*, [illegible] yet another quality show for '04. Once again merging squeaky clean digital animation with subtle shades of CG, *Peace Maker* (adapted from the monthly COMIC BLADE magazine, now a manga series from ADV) is a great-looking series, but it also carries an interesting tone. For as much as they produce, Gonzo certainly can't be accused of recycling ideas. Essentially a tale of personal tragedy and revenge, *Peace Maker* retains a light, comical feel on top of believable layers of drama and authentic swordplay, as young Tetsunosuke, haunted (and driven) by the afterglow of his parents' brutal murder sets out to join the Shinsen-Gumi: an elite group of swordsmen devoted to the protection of Kyoto against the Chosu rebels—the faction responsible for killing his family. All he has left, aside from a wobbly relationship with his conservative older brother, is a thirst for vengeance, and the Shinsen-Gumi is the only way he's going to get it… Too bad he's about five years early; gutting people for a living is not for kids. Be that as it may, his iron will (or it could just be stupidity) lands him in a training battle with the greatest swordsman in Japan, the effeminate yet brutal (he's a complete tool when he's not fighting) Soji Okita, who ends up fascinated with both Tetsu's tenacity and fighting style…even though he nearly kills him. The lessons come fast from that point in the story, as the series takes a turn towards the reality of killing as a way of life and the steep price of vengeance. Tetsu will ultimately have to choose between making peace or becoming the same type of assassin that took the lives of his parents…heavy. Then again, if things get too murky, you can always scene-select to Saizo, Soji-Okita's tiny, fat, pink pet pig.

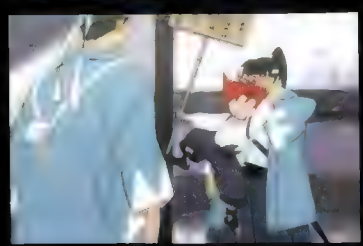
Dave Halverson B-

Studio: ADV Films
Rating: 15 and up
Running Time: 100 minutes
Volume: 1 - "Innocence Lost"





"...Peace Maker retains a light, comical feel on top of believable layers of drama..."



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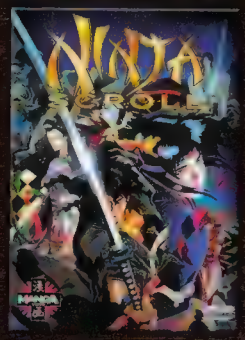

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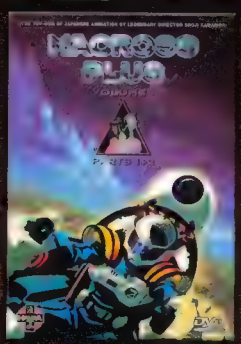

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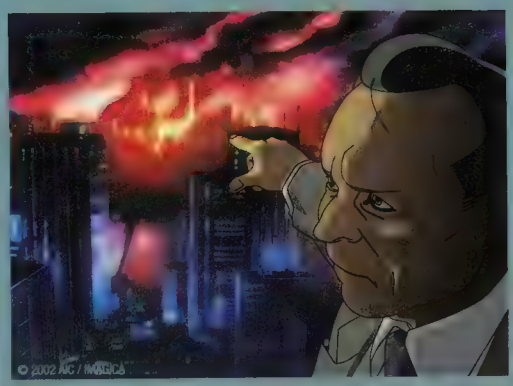
Parasite Dolls

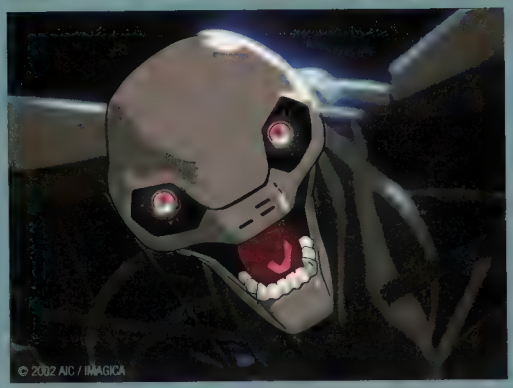
The evil that Boomers do

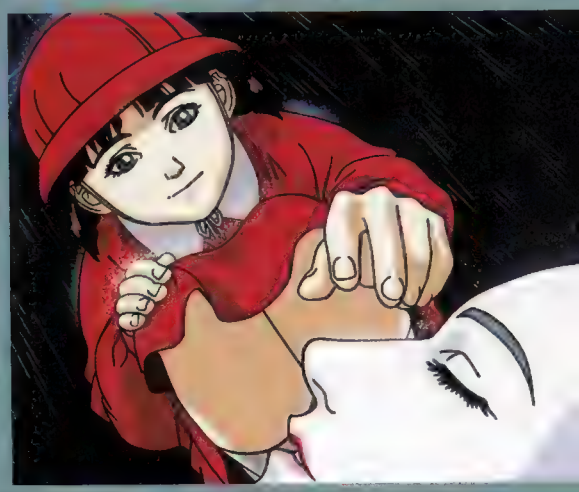
Beyond the traces of *Bubblegum Crisis 2040* and *A.D. Police DNA*, in *Parasite Dolls* exists a different animal (undeniably synthetic), delving ever deeper into the relationship between Boomers—human-like cyborgs introduced into the population by a shadowy government-run organization to do our dirty work—and the people assigned to police them. Stemming far beyond mere malfunction and the subsequent human dismemberment we've become so accustomed to, we're introduced to a more introspective side of soulless beings run amok—sort of a *Blade Runner* meets *Ghost in the Shell* if you will—following three members of Branch—a secret division of the A.D. police consisting of two humans (one female, one male) and one Boomer—as they embark on three separate cases over a seven-year period. The animation here is beautiful often bordering on exquisite, as is the mood, pacing and unspoken dialogue. Rare is the animation that can deliver its underlying tones through subtle expression.

Dave Halverson

Studio: ADV Films
Rating: 17 and up
Running Time: 95 minutes







"...a more introspective side of soulless beings run amok..."

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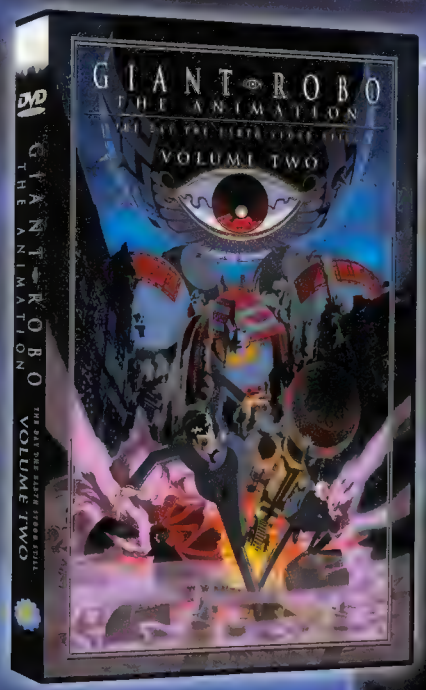
ALL HOPE SEEMS GONE AS DARKNESS ECLIPSES HUMANITY



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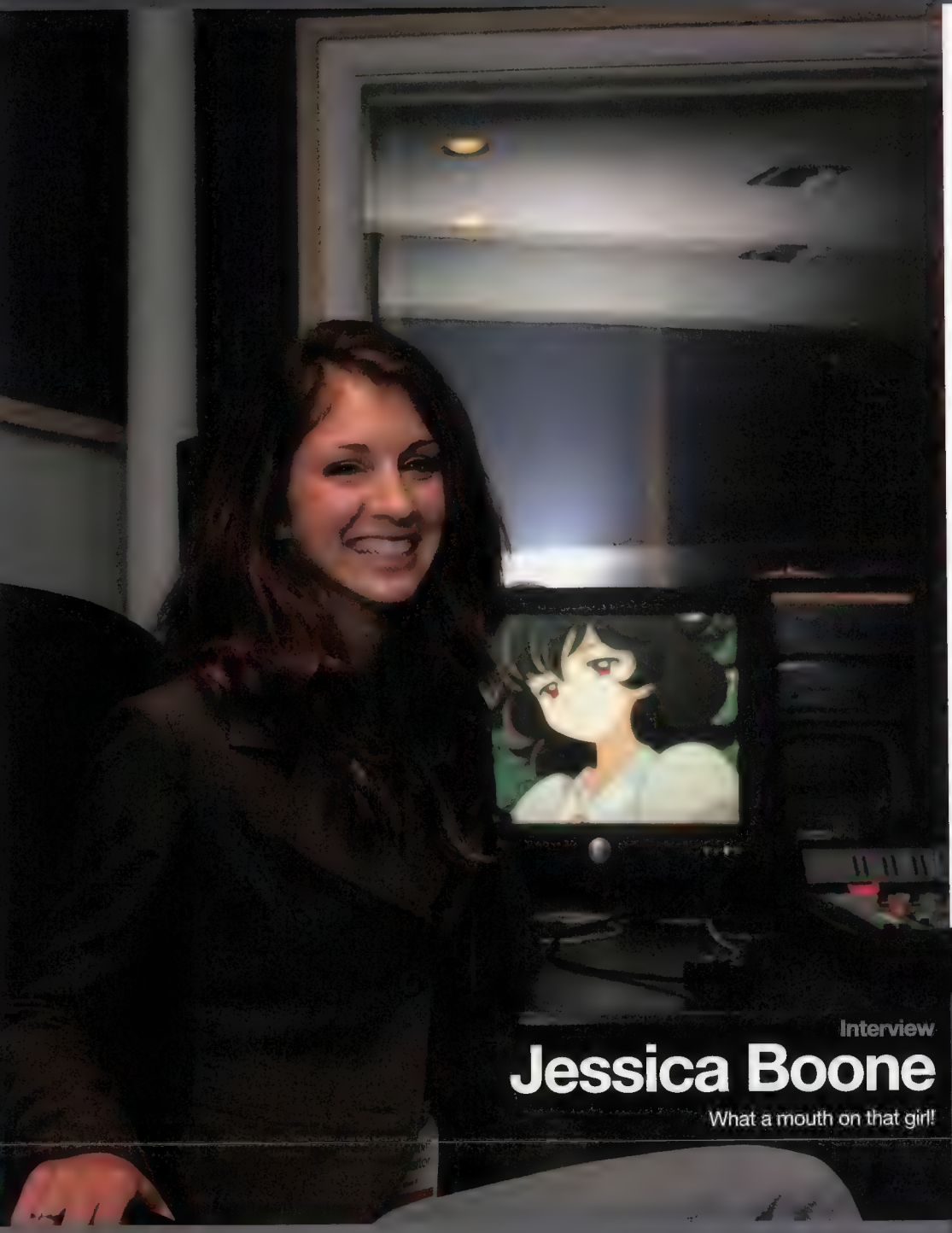


Interview

Jessica Boone

What a mouth on that girl!

Jessica Boone has played them all, appearing in such highly acclaimed anime as *All Purpose Cultural Cat Girl Nuku Nuku, Gravion Zwei, Martian Successor Nadesico: The Motion Picture, Unlimited Saga, Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi, Azumanga Daioh, RahXephon, Nadia, Puni Puni Poemi* and *Angelic Layer*. The thing about Jessica is that she's that rare talent who really pours her heart into every role, becoming the character, which, when you're in the anime game, ain't easy. She has great respect for the art—and is it ever an art—of voice acting, a fact that's never been so apparent as in *Magical Shopping Arcade Abenobashi*, which her and Luci Christian managed to make their own, which was no small task. As anime becomes increasingly prominent in the U.S., personalities like Jessica become a hotter and hotter commodity... So we made it a point to yank her out of the booth for a little Q & A... **Dave Halverson**

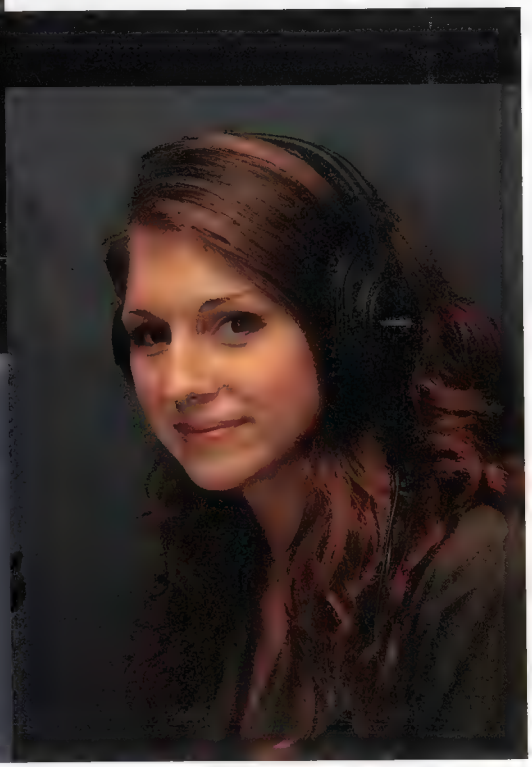
"The thing about Jessica is that she's that rare talent who really pours her heart into every role, becoming the character..."

play: First up, you're awesome! It's a pleasure to be addressing you.
Jessica Boone: Well, thanks! This is my first acting-related interview, so it's kind of cool!

So how did you get into this crazy business?
It was my senior year of high school and I was taking a class at The Alley Theater called Theatre High (sort of a once-a-week thing for kids who really dug acting and directing, etc.). One night Stephen Foster came in and talked to us about anime and what ADV Films was all about, and said that they were always looking for young-sounding voices (since a majority of the characters are typically young kids or teenagers). He arranged auditions for several of us at one of their many infamous "cattle calls" and I actually almost didn't make it to mine! We weren't familiar with that side of town, so my mother and I were frantically trying to find the place; it was a very stressful afternoon. By the time I got there, I was over half an hour late, but thankfully they squeezed me in. *Whew*!

Is voice acting your thing, or do you see it as a stepping stone to other aspirations?
Working fairly consistently at ADV has given me the wonderful opportunity to play around and have fun exploring all the different options I have vocally as an actress. It's probably the only job in the world where you get to be something different every day *and* I can do it wearing jeans and a t-shirt! It's *awesome*! I think my heart will always be in the theatre though. In addition to doing voice-overs, I am currently pursuing a degree in theatre at the University of Houston. I love musical theatre and although I haven't had the opportunity to do much of that recently, I am always busy with plays at school or around town. I think the general rule for aspiring actors is: "Take any job you can get! TV, film, commercials...it's *all* experience." I really enjoy it so as long as there are roles out there to be had...you can bet I'll be at the auditions. Of course, I would *love* to be on Broadway (that's my girlish dream, I suppose, but I'm still young so...who says I *can't*?)

How do you prepare for a role? Does your preparation differ depending on how much of a stretch the character is?



Probably the most important thing I do in preparing for roles is vocal warm-ups. It sounds kind of silly, but my voice is my tool, so keeping it in prime condition is a must. That's something I do before every session. If I know I'm going in for a role that's a little girl, I'll spend some time beforehand just listening to kids talk to each other, picking up little specifics on articulation, pronunciation and mouth placement. I pick up a lot of ideas just from observing people. I can't tell you how many times I've based a character on one of my professors, friends or family members. If I am in a role that's a stretch from what I normally do, or I'm having difficulty with it, I just shake out all the tension and play around, trying new things no matter how goofy it looks or sounds. That's one of the best ways to make discoveries, I think.

Do you prefer any genre(s) in particular?
I tend to get cast as cutesy little girls a lot, which is okay because I'm really comfortable doing it by now; it comes easily to me. Sometimes though, if I've been doing one of those voices for a while, I get to where I can't stand the sound of my own voice. Let's face it; those voices can sound pretty shrill and annoying at times. (I'm sure the sound engineers will agree with me on that!) I'm not too picky though, I suppose; I enjoy doing all kinds of genres because everything is different and that's what makes this job so much fun.

Speaking of which...You killed as Arumi in *Abenobashi*!
Well thank you very much, sir!

That couldn't have been an easy one. How on Earth do you get so supercharged?
Arumi actually *wasn't* an easy one. We went back and forth several times and had to re-record the whole first episode because we just couldn't get the accent right. They wanted it to be southern, to emulate the Osakan accent, but not so much that it was distracting. The first time through I played down the southern drawl a lot, but when it was put next to Luci [Christian]'s track (which ended up being much more noticeable than mine), [producer/director] Don [Rush] decided the thicker accent worked better. It was a little frustrating at first, but that was short-lived. Don Rush has an incredible energy to him and the show itself was absolutely outrageous, so it was always a lot of fun in the studio. Also, lots of sugar helps.

Do you find it easier to work directly with the producer or queue off of other actors?
The way the recording sessions are set up, I don't actually get to interact with the other actors. I go in and watch what the other actors have put down and how it fits with the animation, then play off of that. Sometimes, if I'm the first one to lay down tracks, there are *no* English voices there, so I just listen to how it was inflected in Japanese. Pretty much all recording sessions are like that, working directly with the producer. It's a more intimate setting than if everyone was in there at once, and it allows more focus too. (Well....usually!) The only time I've had the opportunity to actually work with the other actors is if I'm doing a commentary or recording a theme song. Those are especially fun times, but we do get sidetracked by uncontrollable laughter sometimes.

You seem to have an amazing vocabulary—literally and in terms of pop-culture references. As a voice actress, do you study the language quite a bit or just keep your ear to the ground?
I don't *think* I know too much about pop culture references; most of that comes from the scriptwriters. I have a 12-year-old brother, so hanging out with him and listening to all the new "hip slang" the kids are using these days helps keep my vocabulary updated in that respect. (Hah! I say that as if I'm so *old*! I'm only 20 for cryin' out loud!)

You do pretty well. Your commentaries are great. Do you understand or speak any Japanese?
Man, I *wish*! I've actually picked up on a few words and phrases though, just from listening to the Japanese recordings. This past semester I took a voice class and we learned how to transcribe things phonetically. Gaining that knowledge has helped *big time* with pronouncing Japanese names and cities that my Texan tongue sometimes has trouble with.

U.S. dubs have always been suspect, especially with the hardcore Otaku fans. ADV, I believe, was the first company to say the hell with it and just develop cool U.S. scripts, mirroring the material but taking liberties where needed. What do you think? Do you actually have a hand in the translation/ creative process?
All of the translating and script writing takes place before I even set foot in the studio. The Japanese language is beautiful, but when it is directly translated into English, the words sometimes don't mean the same thing, and the flow of the lines in relation to how we would naturally speak gets all jumbled up. I think whenever liberties like that are taken, it's usually in the best interest of the concept of the show. I know my little brother would *never* be able to appreciate or enjoy anime if there was no way for him to understand the language or feel like he was somehow connected to it. He's watched a lot of the stuff I've been in where a *lot* of liberties were taken without corrupting the overall product or message of the show and he absolutely *loved* it. I can definitely see where this would upset hardcore fans, but I'm pretty sure that most of ADV's stuff has the option of watching with only Japanese voices.

What character are you most proud of?
Hmmm...that's a tough one. I think I'm gonna have to go with Arumi from *Magical Shopping Arcade*. It was the first time I had been asked to do a voice that wasn't way up in the cutesy little girl stratosphere, and finding the perfect balance for that accent was pretty challenging at first. And like I said before: that's one of the most kooky, outlandish shows I've ever seen, so I had a great time doing it.

What are you working on currently?... And how's that going?
Let's see...that's a tough one too! Hah! I am currently working on *Cyber Team* as Death Crow, *Chrono Crusade* as Azmaria, *Princess Tutu* as Rue, *Sister Princess* as Shirayuki, and *Hello Kitty* as Mimmi.

Any roles out there you're dying to do?
Hmmm... It's always fun to play against what I normally do, so anything that's a little older, a little deeper, a little meaner or sexier is always tons of fun to play around with. It's a nice departure from the little girl voices.

When you're not at ADV screaming your heart out what else are you up to?
School, school and more school! I go to classes in the mornings, work at ADV in the afternoons, then haul over to rehearsal for whatever plays I'm involved with at school or around town. My schedule is usually jam-packed, so whenever I have downtime, I'll sit down at a piano and just play for a while and sing. It's very relaxing to me. I love to surf and try to go down to Freeport, Texas as often as I can on weekends. I actually took a trip with my family this summer to Puerto Vallarta and brought the boards along. It was amazing.

Any opinion on the cooler stuff airing over here like *The Batman, Teen Titans, MegasXLR*, etc.? You know they must be having gas over at *Mucha Lucha*!
I guess this is one area where I am a horrible anime actress! I'm still a poor college student, so not only am I constantly bogged down with homework, but we only get four channels at our house! *Sigh*...I miss television. I hear good things from my friends though.

We'll send DVDs. Ever consider raiding the ADV database and making crank calls to fans as Arumi? Hey, you and Luci could be the Jerky Girls!
Well, who says we haven't already done that!?

"It's always fun to play against what I normally do, so anything that's a little older, a little deeper, a little meaner or sexier is always tons of fun to play around with." *ADV Voice Actress*

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1 TRUTH
MYSTERY
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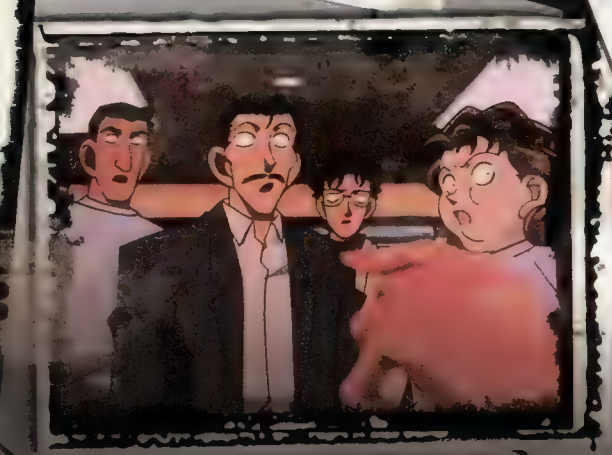

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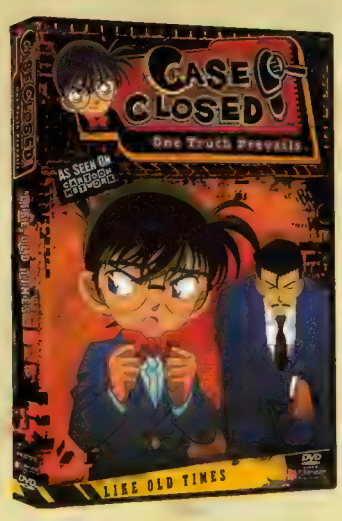

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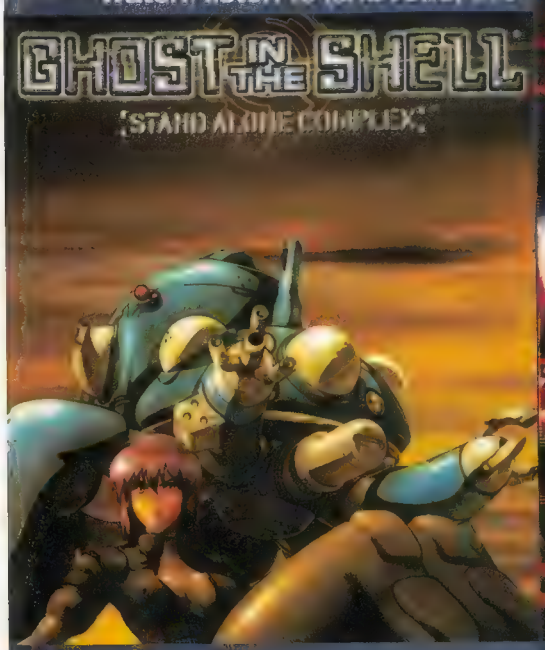
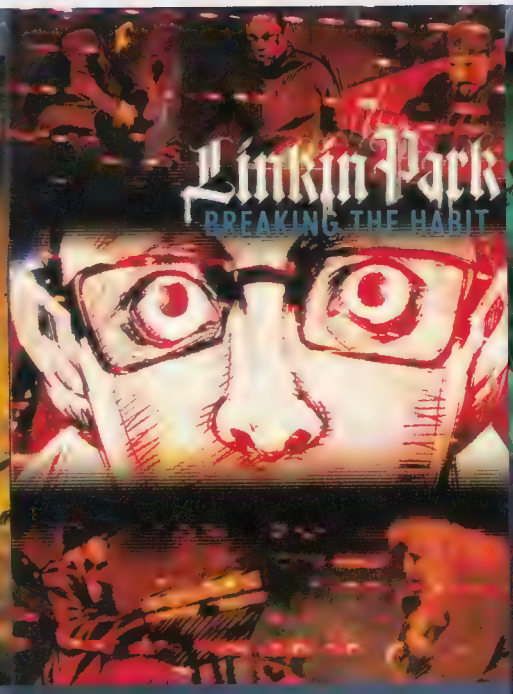
anime essentials

must-have anime, manga & music

watch, listen to (and read) this



Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex
Studio: Manga/Bandai Entertainment
The special edition comes with the "Ha F



Linkin Park: Breaking The Habit
Studio: Warner Bros.
the manga...

read this

Cross
Publisher: TokyoPop
New Reading: Volume 1

Diabolo
Publisher: TokyoPop
New Reading: Volume 2
Selling your soul to the devil is one thing, but when Satan sent...

watch this

Hi Hi Puffy AmiYumi
Station: Cartoon Network

get ready for this

Samurai Champloo
Studio: Geneon Entertainment
Think *Bebop* was cool? Maybe *Kill*...
Samurai Champloo will rock your univers...
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Studio: AnimeWorks
Can a trainload of hotties

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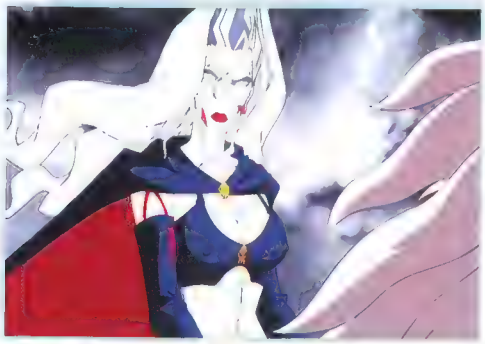
Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01 **Lady Death** *adv films*
02 **Ninja Scroll TV vol. 3** *urban vision*
03 **Fullmetal Alchemist** *funimation productions*
04 **Paranoia Agent** *geneon entertainment*
05 **Yu-Gi-Oh The Movie** *warner home video*
06 **Inu Yasha The Movie 1** *viz, llc*
07 **Inu Yasha The Movie 2** *viz, llc*
08 **Dead Leaves** *manga entertainment*
09 **Ghost in the Shell: SAC** *manga/bandai entertainment*
10 **Gad Guard** *geneon entertainment*



Play Magazine Top Ten

01 **Parasite Dolls** *adv films*
02 **Dead Leaves** *manga entertainment*
03 **Ghost in the Shell: SAC** *manga/bandai entertainment*
04 **Lady Death** *adv films*
05 **URDA The Third Reich** *anime works*
06 **Mezzo TV** *adv films*
07 **Requiem from the Darkness** *geneon entertainment*
08 **R.O.D TV** *geneon entertainment*
09 **Gad Guard** *geneon entertainment*
10 **Stellvia** *geneon entertainment*

your megastore beckons!

Ninja Scroll TV
urban vision

Jubei and company prove that Ninja Scroll has long legs beyond the princess'...

Inu Yasha The Movie 2
viz, llc

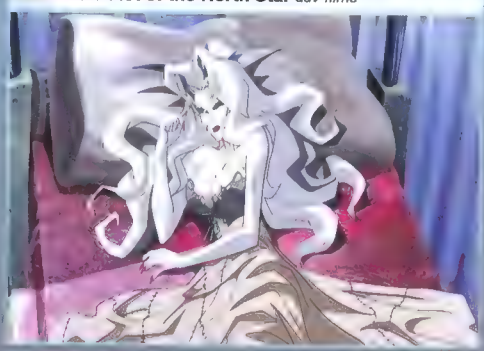
Can't get enough Inu Yasha? Here's more!

Dave Halverson

01 **URDA The Third Reich** *anime works*
02 **Burst Angel** *funimation productions*
03 **Parasite Dolls** *adv films*
04 **Requiem from the Darkness** *geneon entertainment*
05 **Lady Death** *adv films*

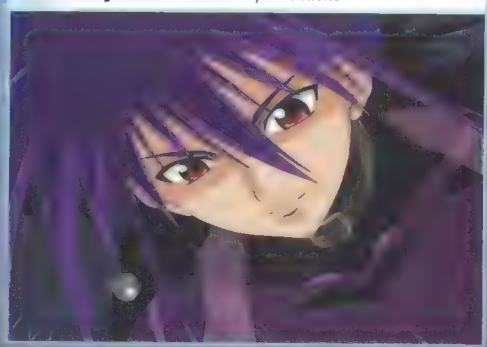
ADV Films' Ryan Nelson

01 **Lady Death** *adv films*
02 **Dead Leaves** *manga entertainment*
03 **Gundam SEED** *bandai entertainment*
04 **Evangelion Platinum vol. 2** *adv films*
05 **New Fist of the North Star** *adv films*



Nelson Lai

01 **DNAngel** *adv films*
02 **Fullmetal Alchemist** *funimation productions*
03 **Burst Angel** *funimation productions*
04 **Kaleido Star** *adv films*
05 **Kiddy Grade** *funimation productions*



Readers' Anime Top Five

01 **Ghost in the Shell: SAC** *manga/bandai entertainment*
02 **Lady Death** *adv films*
03 **Paranoia Agent** *geneon entertainment*
04 **Gundam SEED** *bandai entertainment*
05 **Last Exile** *geneon entertainment*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

01 **Tokyo Tribes vol. 1** *tokyopop manga*
02 **Model vol. 3** *tokyopop manga*
03 **Gundam SEED vol. 1** *tokyopop manga*
04 **Psychic Academy vol. 1** *tokyopop manga*
05 **Dragon Voice vol. 1** *tokyopop manga*

Play Magazine Music Top Five

01 **Japan 4 Sale vol.4** *sony music*
02 **Nami Tamaki: Greeting** *tofu records*
03 **T.M. Revolution: Seventh Heaven** *tofu records*
04 **Ai Yori Aoshi OST** *geneon anime music*
05 **Yoko Ishida: Sweets** *geneon anime music*

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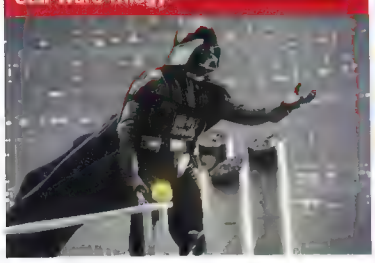
Winners will be posted monthly. Good luck!

Ten Great Gift DVDs

Give the gift that's easy: DVDs! Here's 10 no-brainer gifts that won't set you back and are guaranteed not to go back.

Star Wars Trilogy



What's so great about it? Only a collection of three of the greatest sci-fi epics of all time and every bit of nerdy extras you could possibly dream of.
What's on it? You asked for it: *Episode IV: A New Hope*, with commentary by Mr. George Lucas, Benn Burtt, Dennis Muren, and Carrie Fisher; *Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* with commentary by all of the above plus Irvin Kershner; *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* with commentary from the first group; and a bonus disc including the most comprehensive feature-length documentary ever produced on the saga, new footage from the making of all three films, featurettes, teasers, a playable Xbox demo of Battlefront, the making of the Episode III game and a preview of *Star Wars Episode III*.
20th Century Fox Home Video
387 minutes

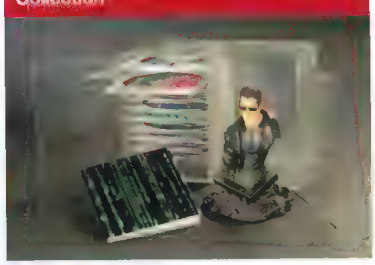
Shrek 2

What's so great about it? The ugly green guy actually gets the girl. *Shrek* was the coolest thing to happen to CG since the computer, and somehow DreamWorks managed to answer with an even better sequel and $430 million at the box office.
What's on it? An all-new animated segment created exclusively for the DVD that features all your fairytale favorites and a few surprises, commentary, technical goofs, Puss in Boots, Meet the Cast and Shrek Tech vignettes, a music room and more than 20 games and activities.
DreamWorks
92 minutes

Batman: The Animated Series Volume 1

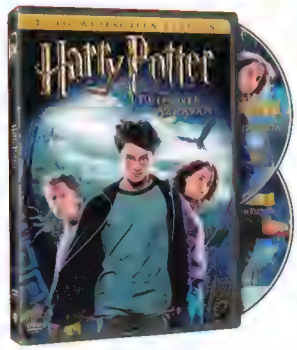
What's so great about it? Four discs and 28 episodes of the groundbreaking noir-style prime-time animated series that infused the Dark Knight with unbridled sequel and licensing power, because it's simply magnificent.
What's on it? A retrospective featurette, The Dark Knight's First Knight pilot promo, a tour of the bat cave and commentary on two key episodes by series producers with Bruce Timm, Eric Rodomski and Paul Dini.
Warner Home Video
625 minutes

Limited Edition Ultimate Matrix Collection



What's so great about it? It's the most ambitious science fiction trilogy ever created, setting the bar so high initially that the sequels, which otherwise obliterate any competition, couldn't possibly evoke anything but denial.
What's on it? This is the definitive 10-disc DVD set with all three films in the trilogy together for the first time ever with a newly remastered picture and sound for *The Matrix*, a companion piece titled *The Matrix Revisited* and the best-selling *The Animatrix*, plus five entirely new DVDs packed solid with brand-new supplemental materials that encompass every aspect of the Matrix universe, including two new audio commentaries on each film, Enter the Matrix video game footage, 106 featurettes (if only it had 107!), a limited-edition Neo mini-bust figurine and an 80-page collector's book.
Warner Home Video
Infinity minutes

Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban



What's so great about it? This is where the series starts to get dark, and the directors follow suit. *Azkaban* permits Harry and company to get medieval, and director Alfonso Cuaron dug deep to make it happen and stay within the series' PG status.
What's on it? 3D animated menus, interactive challenges, deleted scenes, animal trainer interviews lead by Johnny Vaughan and the Shrunken Head, an interview with JK Rowling and the filmmakers, iPix tours, choir practice and a portrait gallery.
Warner Home Video
142 minutes

Buffy the Vampire Slayer: The Complete 7th Season

What's so great about it? It's *Buffy*, fool! Only the queen of pounding latex-clad goons into submission without breaking a sweat, and quite possibly (depending on who you talk to) the best network TV series ever created. Get with the program.
What's on it? Twenty-two episodes on six discs, with commentary on "Help," "Selfless," "Conversations with Dead People," "The Killer in Me," "Lies My Parents Told Me" and "Dirty Girls." Also: three featurettes, a season 7 overview, outtakes, "Buffy Wraps" and, on DVD rom, a Willow Demon Guide.
20th Century Fox Home Video
990 minutes

Godzilla 50th Anniversary 7 pack

What's so great about it? Men in rubber suits and the coolest miniature work ever, spanning generations, until America got a hold of it and turned it into a scared giant iguana with feelings. Godzilla is the definitive movie monster, and this is a great collection of the last nine movies leading up to *Godzilla SOS*, the final film out on DVD this December.
What's on it? Nine movies with various extras, including *Godzilla 2000, Godzilla vs. Destroyah, Godzilla vs. King Ghidorah, Godzilla Mothra and King Ghidora: Giant Monsters All-Out Attack, Godzilla and Mothra: The Battle for Earth, Godzilla vs. MegaGuirus, Godzilla Against MechaGodzilla*, and *Godzilla*.
Columbia TriStar
810 minutes

SpongeBob SquarePants: The Complete Second Season

What's so great about it? A talking sponge.
What's on it? Around the world with SpongeBob SquarePants featurette, audio commentaries by the animators, storyboards, Nick DVD game demo, 39 episodes of utter insanity.
Paramount Home Video
451 minutes

Mulan Special Edition

What's so great about it? It's one of the few Disney films worth suffering through the singing bits for, besides *Hercules* and *The Lion King*.
What's on it? Two discs including deleted scenes, a new song, alternate openings, a music video featuring Jackie Chan, Raven and Christina Aguilera, games and activities, "Discovering Mulan" featurette and a new digital transfer.
Buena Vista Home Video
88 minutes

Invader Zim Volumes 1, 2 & 3

What's so great about it? Not enough room to expound, so you'll have to trust us…just everything.
What's on it? Each volume has eight or nine episodes on two discs, with commentaries and extras like animatics, interviews, pig commentary and, of course, Irken subtitles. Volume 3 features the uncut version of The Most Horrible Christmas Ever and the unaired season two episodes the world has been waiting for.
Anime Works
225 min each

King Arthur

Starring: Clive Owen, Joan Gruffudd, Keira Knightley, Mads Mikkelsen
Director: Antoine Fuqua
Released By: Buena Vista Home Video
Rated: PG-13

King Arthur, like *The 13th Warrior*, another gritty medieval tale, was compromised on its way to the big screen to appease the PG-13 gods, although *The 13th Warrior* fared slightly better in the end by retaining its R rating. On the one hand, you have a beautifully filmed sweeping epic bathed in the kind of grand cinematography, flawless sets, costume design (whoever chiseled the armor should get an award) and fog machines needed to hammer home a medieval tale, but on the other lies a film afraid to depict the brutality it tries so hard to convey. Set against the backdrop of the *real* Arthur (or so new evidence would have us believe), sent on a final suicide mission to win the freedom of his men—Lancelot, Gawain, Galahad, Tristan, Bors and Dagonet—the film shines dramatically, but loses its stomach when the blood should spill and limbs fly. Arthur takes us to the brink and then tries to blow us over with a breath rather than the swift blow to the groin we're expecting. Things look up when the Saxons take chase (although the final battle between Arthur and their leader is anti-climatic) and Keira Knightly looks fab in tattooed blue (she's great by the way—at least half the reason to stay tuned), but in the end, *Arthur* needs less male bonding and more male beating. Still, with the aid of Hans Zimmer and what remains of Fuqua's vision, *Arthur* delivers more than not. It could have been great though, if only they'd have let him have his R.
Extras: A swell making-of (sans squabbling), cast and filmmaker roundtable, alternate ending...all nicely done.
Dave Halverson
Movie: B **Extras:** B

Super Size Me

Starring: Morgan Spurlock
Director: Morgan Spurlock
Released By: Hart Sharp Video
Rated: PG-13

The little kids in *Super Size Me* may not recognize Jesus, but they sure as hell light up when Ronald McDonald's in the house. In the humorous and slightly disturbing *Super Size Me*, filmmaker Morgan Spurlock undergoes a little experiment: what would happen if all he did was eat McDonald's for 30 days? Day one: vomit. The perils of fast food may be obvious, but then again, that's not the point when you're a fast-food, junk-food nation like us. As we watch Spurlock's health deteriorate under the posturing of doctors and nutritionists, he takes us through interviews that reach outside the overall indictment of McDonald's, detailing the obesity problem we face today and our kids' horrific diets in the public school systems. If you're up on the implications of your eating habits, there's not much here overly illuminating—yes, a liter of Coke in one sitting just isn't cool—but watching the free-spirited Spurlock take us through his daily grind of Big Macs and Chicken McNuggets—wait, there's how many ingredients in these

mysterious nuggets?—playing up the nastiness of his contents is subversive fun. For all its entertainment value, *Super Size Me* does get you thinking—and you probably won't chomp down on another all-beef patty ever again.
Extras: Deleted scenes are interesting but definitely didn't belong in the final cut; I liked watching the French fries show imperviousness to mold stuck in a glass jar. Audio commentary by Spurlock is especially entertaining and adds a completely new dynamic to watching the film the second time. Extra interviews: the author of Fast Food Nation, who was curiously absent from the original cut, adds his disturbing two cents. **Brady Flechter**
Movie: B+ **Extras:** B

Hero

Starring: Jet Li, Tony Leung Chiu-Wai
Director: Zhang Yimou
Released By: Miramax Home Video
Rated: PG-13

Deliriously beautiful and operatic in spirit, *Hero* is a dazzling display of cinematic artistry. Nearly every shot in the film has some hypnotic detail of color and light and pageantry. It's easy to completely lose yourself to its visual miracles. Not the same can be said about the story, which, while entertaining and capable, leaves its characters in the throngs of thin passion. Jet Li plays Nameless, an indomitable warrior who claims to have defeated the land's three most deadly assassins, Broken Sword (Tony Leung), Flying Snow (Maggie Cheung) and Sky (Donnie Yen). Hero's tale unfolds in ambiguous flashbacks as Nameless sits across from the King of Qin (Chen Dao Ming), describing his encounter with the assassins as he thwarted their attempts to snuff out the King and alter the political climate of warring third-century China. The truth is never quite revealed, as a torrid love triangle builds and obscures their unified efforts. As emotions soar, so do the martial arts elegance and spectacle. Armies clash, arrows pierce the sun-torched skies, poetically shot blades clash in a flurry of poetic imagery. Even when the core of *Hero* keep its characters at an emotional distance, you're completely enraptured by the sheer power of their breathtaking world. **Brady Flechter**
Movie: B+ **Extras:** NA

Arrested Development Season One

Starring: Jason Bateman, Portia de Rossi, Will Arnett, Michael Cera
Director: Rawson Marshall Thurber
Released By: 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment
Rated: NA

My friends had been screaming at me all last season to catch the award-sweeping *Arrested Development*, and now I know why. This is easily one of the funniest comedy the vacuous networks have to offer. Its humor is off-kilter and edgy, riding on the absurd, shining a characterized light on sweeping family dysfunction. The show possesses a live-wire surrealism, shot with a documentary style that puts a refreshing spin on the typical comedy. As we follow the contemptuous Bluth family, recently stripped of their bloated life of privilege and fighting awkwardly to deal with their self-proclaimed tragedy, they get themselves in plenty of sitcom assembly line positions, but you can't help but bust a gut watching these sharp, layered characters go through their eccentric paces.
Extras: Some good audio commentaries, highlighted by the pilot-episode observations of series creator Mitchell Hurwitz, actor Jason Bateman and directors Joe and Anthony Russo. Few deleted scenes and the Breaking Ground: Behind the Scenes of *Arrested Development* featurette round things out. **Brady Flechter**
Movie: A- **Extras:** B

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Top 10 Holiday Gift Guide

Two-thousand four will be marked as a banner year for the consumer electronics industry. We've seen products push the envelope that will change the way we live our lives forever—not only by improving our productivity but also giving us hours of entertainment. No doubt about it, we're living in an age where cutting-edge technology is king and, quite frankly, we couldn't be happier.

In preparing for the 2004 holiday season, we had the privilege of checking out the latest and greatest products that span the gamut of what's hot in consumer electronics. From ultra-high-end video cameras to the best plasma on the market, whatever you're into, we've got you covered.

New PlayStation 2

Why Because you know you want one
Details Measuring only an inch wide and weighing about half of the original, this PS2 is perfect for the minimalist in you. In addition to having all of the functionality of a PS2, it has built-in Ethernet and an analog modem port. Gosh, the Japanese really do think of everything, don't they?
Price $149.99

Motorola Razr V3

Why: So you can have the slickest cell phone around
Details: Looking like something out of Minority Report, the V3 is the perfect blending of cutting-edge technology with a beautiful design. At only 13.9mm thin, 53mm wide and 98mm long, the V3 is one of the slimmest phones on the market. But don't let its svelte appearance fool you; the V3 is packed with functionality including a 64K color display, integrated VGA camera with 4x zoom, Bluetooth technology and MP3 ringer support.
Price: Dependant on carrier

Dell Axim X50v

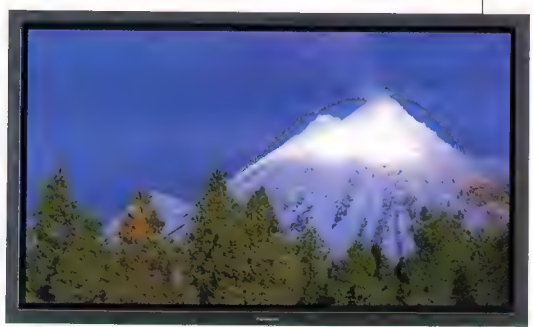
Why: Your PDA sucks compared to this
Details: On the outside it may look like an ordinary Pocket PC, but what sets the X50v apart from the competition is what's under the hood—namely an Intel 2700G graphics accelerator. That's right, this baby can play back DVD-quality video and play games your GBA could only dream about. Other key features include a 3.7" VGA display, integrated Wi-Fi, Bluetooth and 64MB of memory.
Price: $499.99

Creative Zen Portable Media Center

Details: Imagine being able to watch up to 85 hours of video in the palm of your hand. Or what about listening to over 9,000 songs at the touch of a button? It's all possible with Creative's little wonder, the Zen Portable Media Center. With a large 3.8" TFT backlit LCD display, the Zen PMC shows off incredibly clear images and excellent video playback. Users can quickly transfer files from their PC via USB 2.0. What's cool is that it automatically syncs up with Windows Media Player 10. Without question, this is the ultimate in portable entertainment.
Price: $499.99

Panasonic ONYX XVS Plasma

Why: For total bragging rights
Details: Talk about wow factor. The ONYX XVS is truly a sight to behold. Utilizing Panasonic's most advanced display technology—Super Real Gamma System—it increases the darker areas of the screen (to an unreal level of 2,048 shades) and the equivalent of 8.5 billion colors. The color saturation is phenomenal. What we liked most about the ONYX was the single pane of glass that masks the entire front panel. When the unit is turned on, it looks like the image is floating in air. Pretty damn slick.
Price: $20,000



Sony HDR-FX1

Why: To bring out the inner Spielberg in you
Details: If you're getting bored of your Mini DV camcorder, how about moving up to HD? The HDF-FX1 is the first HD camera that has three 1/3-inch 16:9 1.12 megapixal gross CCDs, where each chip measures 960x1080. This allows the camera to capture at 1080i MPEG-2 video, which we all know is the HDV standard. How is the video quality? What do you think? The video quality is unsurpassed. Nothing is like filming in high-definition. Other key features include a 12X Zeiss Vario-Sonnar T Zoom lens, selectable gammas and a nice 3.5 inch LCD.
Price: $3,699.99

Toshiba Qosmio Media Center Laptop

Why: To make traveling in Coach Class that much better
Details: What better way to travel than with the Qosmio, a beautiful 17-inch widescreen notebook that runs Microsoft XP Media Center Edition 2005? In addition to being a top-notch laptop to take care of all of your everyday needs such as email, word processing, etc., the Qosmio is also a DVD player, a PVR, TV and stereo. With up to 100GB of storage, you can record all of your favorite TV shows and watch them on the road. The Ultimate TruBrite screen (which uses two lamps for extreme brightness) is pretty spectacular.
Price: $2,999.99

Top 10 Holiday Gift Guide

JVC HD-52Z575 HD-ILA Rear Projection HD Television

Why: One of the best pictures we've seen this year
Details: So you don't have $20K to spend on a plasma; what do you do? Head over to your local retailer and check out this 52-inch beauty. So what's the big deal about HD-ILA Microdisplay? The JVC D-ILA chip is the highest density device available and, at any given size, it has the highest resolution compared to other units of the same size. This set incorporates three of them. This three-chip structure allows for continuous flicker- and burn-free picture quality. Translation—for the price, this is the best picture you can get.
Price: $4,499.95

Atari Classic Game Console

Why: So you can relive your childhood memories
Details: While some of you may not have been born then, back in the 1980s, Atari was king with their 2600 and 7800 game systems. The Classic Game Console brings back 20 classic Atari games built right into the system. Games like Air-Sea Battle, Adventure (yes, the secret key is in there) and Centipede. Included are two Atari 7800-inspired joysticks as well. For the price, you can't beat it.
Price: $44.95

Voodoo Vibe

Why: Because it's bad ass!
Details: Microsoft is making a big push for the whole "media center experience" this year, and we can't think of a better way to dive in than with the Voodoo Vibe. Incorporating the best of PC, TiVo Replay TV and Xbox, the Vibe is your one-stop shop for total entertainment nirvana. Key features like dual TV tuners, Xbox Extender (which lets you use your Xbox as a node to view what's running on the Media Center PC), and the latest AMD Athlon 64 processor make the Vibe a no-brainer for the hardcore user.
Price: Dependant on configuration—starting $3,399.99

GAMEGEAR

EvoSport GT

The EvoSport GT wireless wheel, designed for play with GTA but also great for the NASCARs, Burnouts and Gran Turismos of the world, features Pelican's "Active Torque System," providing realism beyond that of force feedback or springs found in other wheels. It also boasts an analog stick on the wheel, a handy battery life meter, F1 and manual gearshifts, a sensitivity dial and full-size pedals.

PELICAN

AfterGlow Pro controllers

If you like your accessories flashy, look no further than the AfterGlow Pro series of controllers. These formidable fully analog pads with 10-foot cords and rumble capabilities light up like a Christmas tree when tethered to your console of choice, complete with a trippy Kaleidoscope effect on the logo. Multiplayer looks like the Main Street Electrical Parade.

HORI

Memory Card

At $14.99, the officially licensed Hori Game Boy Player Digital Controller is the perfect pad for Advance gaming on the GameCube. Hori has also been granted the first officially licensed third-party memory card, so now you can get 251 blocks of Nintendo-quality saves for only $17.99.

Game Boy Player Digital Controller

MAD CATZ

MC's all-in-one DS solution includes adaptors for AC and the car, a game case, a hardware case and an extra stylus to replace the one your little brother stuck in his eye. Expect the mother load of DS gizmos in the months to come...

DS Kit Pro

Universal Premium Dance Pad

A pad for all reasons. Xbox, GameCube and PS2 compatible.

artificial
but not intelligent

Hellbaby
Sideshow Toys

Based on an original concept maquette study for the Hellboy film, this polystone statue perfectly captures the impish Hellboy, as first found by U.S. soldiers. Standing approximately 16 1/2" tall, with a faux bronze finish, this li'l sucker is 10 pounds of collectible perfection. www.sideshow-toy.com

Urban Vinyl

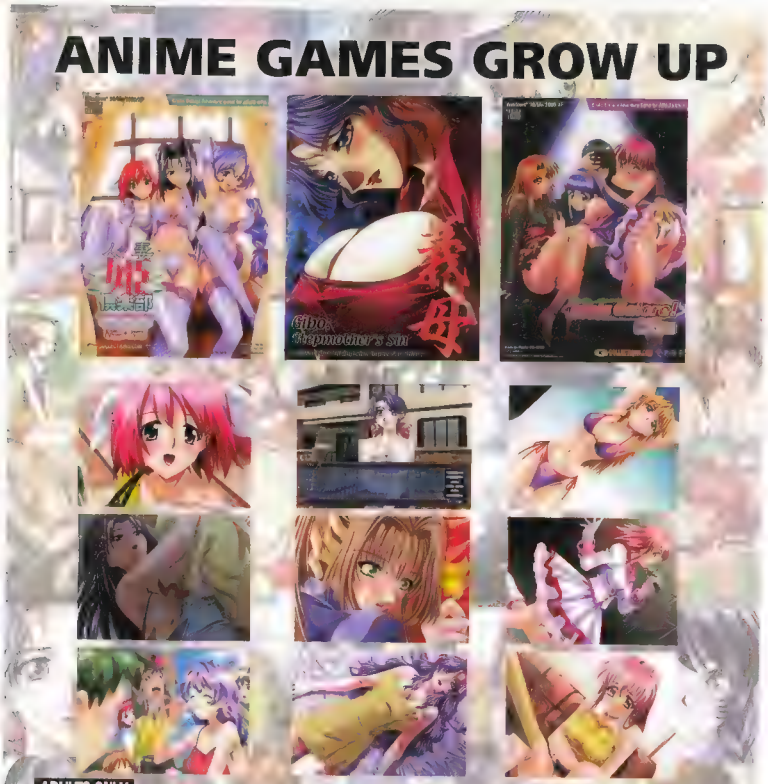
Check the ultra-cool Urban Vinyl figurines ($35.95 set) from the hit console game Alien Hominid, including: Alien, FBI Agent, Bustletron, Fat Kid and Thundersnap. They have skateboards, T-shirts and other stuff too. Respect the Hominid today at Alienhominid.com!

Yamato USA

Guilty Gear Isuka, Capcom girls, Burst Angel, Range Murata Collection, Cowboy Bebop

Besides these lovely figures you see here, Yamato USA is home to, by far, the best and deepest collection of game and anime figures in the world. For details on how much and where to buy, dial 'em up on the web at www.yamatotoyusa.com.

ANIME GAMES GROW UP



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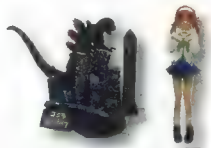

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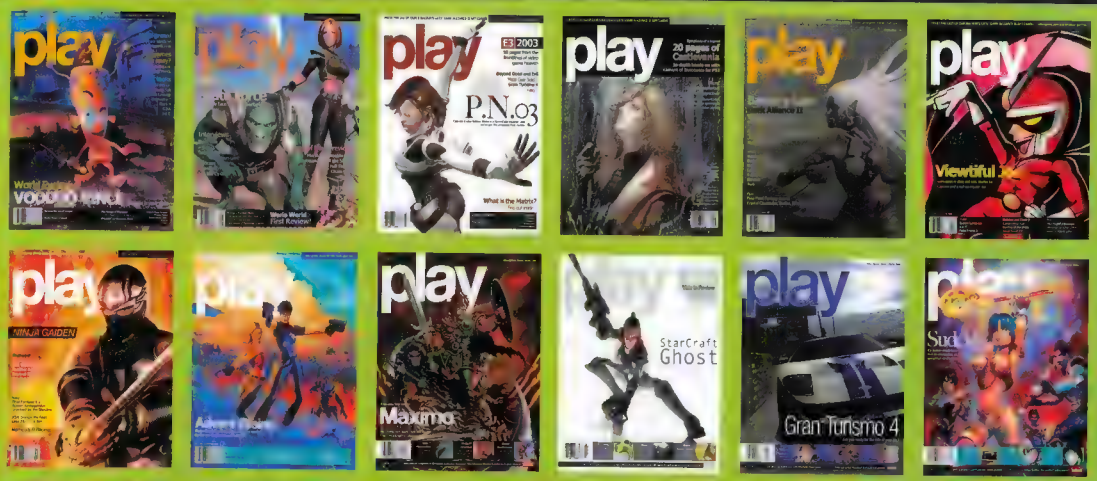

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